

Asura Cryin'

アスラクライン



Volume 1

Mikumo Gakuto

アスラクライ

夏目智春はごく平凡な十五歳。ただし幽霊憑き。水無神操緒は智春の幼なじみ。美少女。スタイル良好。ただし、幽霊。

高校入学式の前日、二人の前に現れたのは黒ずくめの服を着た綺麗なお姉さん。彼女が智春に手渡したトランクには謎の兵器、機巧魔神が封印されていた……。

そんな謎のトランクを狙って智春の前に現れるのは、自称・悪魔の巫女もどき少女と、第二の幽霊を連れた幽霊憑きの生徒会長。世界を救うために悪魔を減ばせて、そんなことを命令されても困るんですけど——？

世界の破滅まで残り七百十九日。

二巡目の世界で暴走するハイスクール・パンク開幕。

三雲岳斗

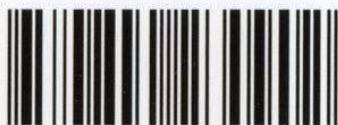


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アスラクライ

三雲岳斗

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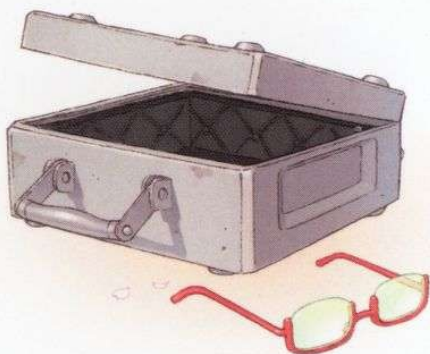
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みくもがくと
三雲岳斗

大分県出身横浜市在住。第五回電撃ゲーム小説大賞《銀賞》受賞作『コールド・ゲヘナ』でデビュー。バイク好き……の割に最近あまり乗っていないのは忙しいからであって、決してスピード違反で免許の点数が残り少ないからではない、はず。

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アスラクライン

イラスト: ^{わたぬき}和狸ナオ

1976年生誕の千葉県民。くじ運は最低ながら今回挿絵を描かせて頂き、実はすごく仕事運が良いのでは……!?と人生見直しております。遅咲きな絵描き兼ぬるいゲーマーですが、よろしくどうぞ。

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スリリングでドキドキな、高校生活が始まった!?

美少女たちに 囲まれて——

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絶対少年 妖精たちの夏~田菜	浜崎達也 イラスト/戸部 淑

▶▶▶ 7月の新刊につきましては、オビ折り返しをご覧ください

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AHEADシリーズ 終わりのクロニクル⑤<下>	川上 稔
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アスラクライン	三雲岳斗
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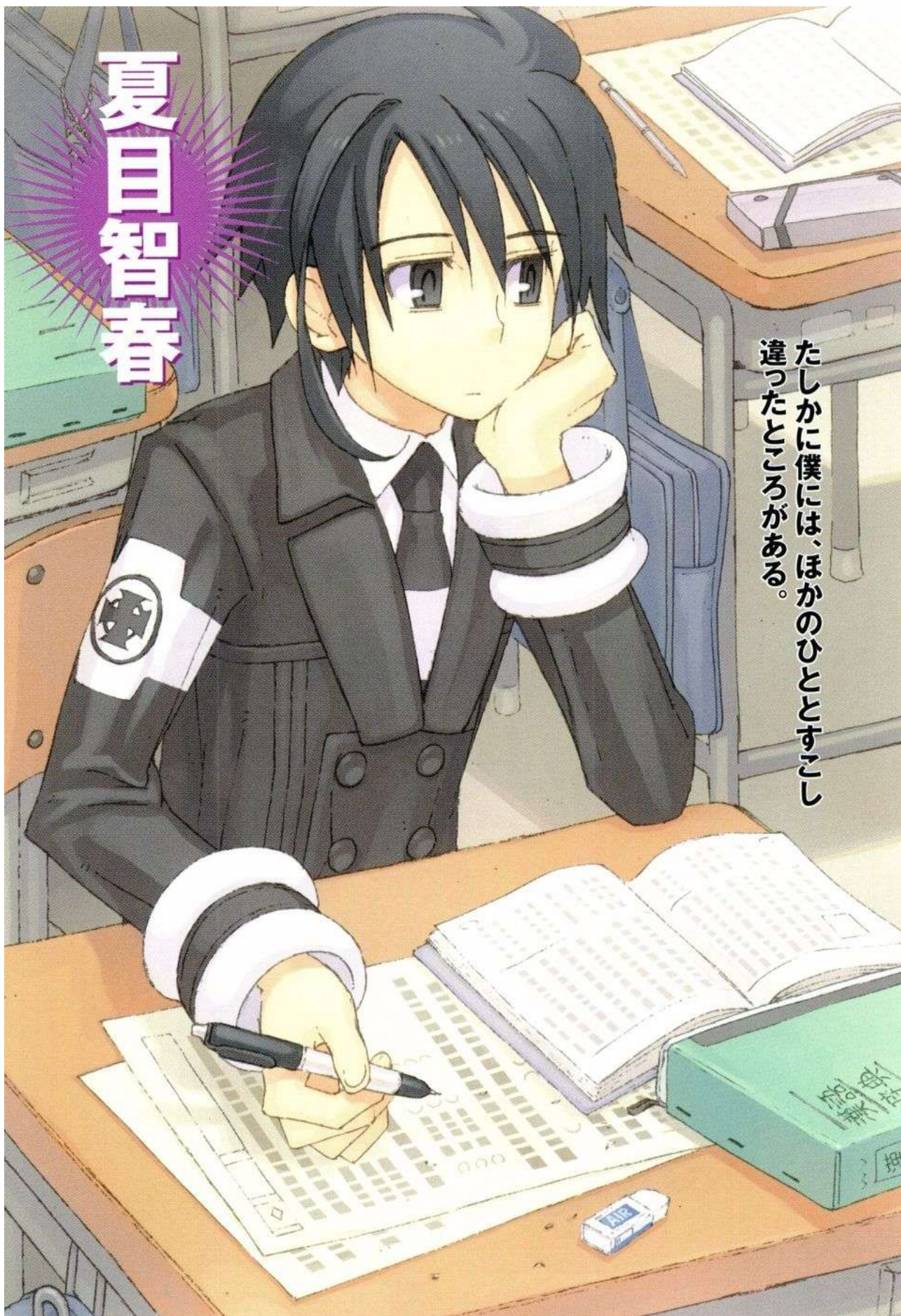
恐がらないで。あたしが智春をまもってあげるよ……

アスラ クライン

三雲岳斗
イラスト◎和狸ナオ

夏目智春

たしかに僕には、ほかのひととすこし
違ったところがある。



——根元に死体が
埋まつてるかも

僕には、ほかのひとには見えない、
幽霊が憑いている。

操緒





クラス分け、見てないでしょ？
7組だよ。あたしと一緒に

だけどそれを別にすれば、
平凡な高校生活が始まるはずだった。

大原杏

樋口琢磨

北中出身のやつだよ。嵩月奏。
こいつもすげえ美人だぞ



……アスラ・マキーナは
……どう？

ところが僕の高校生活は、
とんでもないことになっていった。

謎の巫女



潮泉老人

奏お嬢様のことを
よろしく願います

八伎

おそらくきみは、間もなく
ひとつの選択をせまられる
ことになるだろう

そのすべては、彼女があの特ランクを
もって来たときから始まった……

それは最初から
あなたたちのものよ

黒崎朱湊

ブックデザイン／荻窪裕司

アスラ クライ



Prologue

Three years ago, I was on an airplane for the first time in my life. The reason was something to do with the parents of my childhood friend, demanding and forcefully inviting me over to London, to visit and play with their daughter.

In this world, there are things we label as fateful; things like being forced on a plane without any regard of my own will. Namely, Flight MS 901 of Maiden Atlantic, departing from Narita Airport and heading toward Heathrow Airport. This all happened during spring break, right before the welcoming ceremony of the new semester in middle school.

That day, I had two really displeasing things on my mind.

The first thing was the reality that I suffered from terrible acrophobia.

My eyes stared at the unimaginably dull and thick shadow underneath the plane. The idea that something this bulky and cumbersome is able to glide through the sky was just unimaginable. No matter how I thought about it, I couldn't grasp that concept. And the dream I had last night had been an absolute nightmare. It was something along the lines of me failing the school entrance exams, or me stepping off the side a sheer cliff, or the space-ship I was ridding in burned up to hell in the upper atmosphere - nothing but nightmares about falling. After being delayed to hell by the troublesome luggage check-in, and then further hassled by customs over my documents, and sitting myself down in my designated seat in the plane, I was in the mood and ready to throw myself out of the window and just die.

Another reason for my depression was that my childhood friend, Misao, happened to be my traveling buddy sitting next to me in a wretchedly foul mood.

Minakami Misao. Born under Gemini. Blood type AB. Even though she had been exuberant about visiting her parents, after seeing my face in the morning, she started acting suspicious and midway through the flight. I could tell she was burning up with irritation. I'd try to ask her what was wrong, but she wouldn't answer. Was saying "It's nothing out of the ordinary" such a terrible reply when she asked what I thought about her outfit earlier? But as everything from her hair to her coat was the same as any other day, it wasn't like I could have said anything else. Even though the two of us had always been close since kindergarten, I still have no idea just what Misao is thinking.

"Uh, hey!"

"..."

When I called to her, she would simply turn to me without a word. Her eyes, big and fair as they were, would always be half-way closed as if she was doing it on purpose. Misao was definitely something of a beauty and, because of that, it was unusually scary when she was angry.

And it was this scary and angry Misao that now sat next to me in the aisle seat furiously crunching down on chocolate.

"About that chocolate... I bought it... as a present for your parents..."

"So what?" was her reply.

"Uh... nothing. Ah, did you see the girl sitting in the seat right in front of us?"

"Didn't notice."

"She's drop-dead gorgeous, you know. She's probably just a middle-schooler, but she's tall."

"So why should I care?"

"... I'm thinking she is a performer. Her legs are long... her torso is probably the same."

"Idiot, pervert, lecher, sexual harasser." she snapped.

And all the other passengers turned back toward me. Even the beauty in the seat front of us was throwing her glances toward us and laughing. I was getting increasingly more distraught and Misao's irritation too seemed to worsen.

The plane undocked from the boarding bridge and then slowly rolled onto the runway. My seat by the window was a lot higher than I had previously imagined and when I looked outside at the scenery, I remember feeling my head swimming in a haze of light dizziness.

"Um..."

I turned to ask Misao about switching seats when finally hit me. Strapped around the collar of her coat was a necktie I had never seen her wear before.

"Hmm? Misao, could that outfit be...?"

Misao's furious chocolate-wolfing movements froze.

She slowly looked at me and, in a purposefully curt tone, said: "Yes, it's the middle school uniform. I want to show it to Dad and Mom..." Misao stopped there and studied my face as if she was expecting something. From my past experience I knew that if I gave the wrong reply at this critical juncture, I was going to be in a world of trouble.

"Umm... yeah! It suits you, it definitely suits you." I wondered if this is going to be good enough.

"Really?"

A smile lit across Misao's face. In a playfully cute gesture, Misao offered me back the half-eaten piece of chocolate. "Jeez, it took you long enough! Here, I'm giving it to you."

"Well, this is the present I had bought for your parents. Besides, there is just no way I am supposed to know what you're wearing under your coat. Anyway, I really just want to switch seats..."

"What's wrong? Wait... are you afraid of flying? How come?"

"You already know I'm afraid of heights! The plane is flying, isn't it? If it's flying, it has to come down, right? My older brother told me that planes accidents happen a lot during take-offs and landings."

"It'll be alright. It's not just going to fall out of the sky, you know."

Misao smiled; her expression soft and gentle as she squeezed my frigid hands. Her hands were small and warm and a sensation of familiarity and comfort welled up within me. I would come to reminiscence, many a time after, the warmth cradled within and nestled between our embracing palms. Many times. Yes, many, many times.

"-It'll be alright. I'm by your side" She was right. Halfway.

That day, Flight MS 901 of Maiden Atlantic crashed into the ocean.

Chapter 1

Because my mother remarried.

To put it simply, that was the reason why I started living by myself.

It most certainly wasn't because of something like "I got into an argument with my mom over her remarriage and was chased out of the house."

My biological father died before I entered elementary school, so I have nothing but the fuzzy memories of him, and the man my mom wanted to remarry was, anyway, a seemingly well-loved pediatrician; I simply had no excuse to protest against it. Who knows what sort of strange fate had decreed that such a respected man had to marry mom; perhaps it was the product of something akin to careless pity.

Soon after he joined our family, the reality of the remarriage hit me, and since I had shut up and entered a state of extreme focus as if I was already taking my high school entrance exams, I really wasn't in a position to complain.

Anyway, the call for me to move out was sudden and surprising, but I can't say I wasn't happy about it.

That is not to say I didn't have any problems with it either.

Namely, the first problem came soon after mom's new husband, Mr. Sonomiya, bought an apartment in a new complex. "2LDK" apparently means the number of bedrooms is two. The parents would use one of the rooms and then there would be only one room left. The loan for the place was set for some twenty years and, in the meantime, and let's just say declaring "We've got a new member in our family" isn't going to be good enough to trade the place for somewhere bigger. Well, that's that.

And then, another problem was that Mr. Sonomiya had a daughter about my age.

She was named Kazuha Sonomiya. Fourteen years old.

So to me, the daughter of Mom's new husband would become my younger sister. A one year different and unrelated younger sister.

To say I wasn't a bit excitedly optimistic would be a lie.

I was, after all, the youngest amongst two brothers, so the people in my usual environment were always just these unsexy and unappealing brothers five years and above my senior. And one day, I'm told out of the blue that I would have a younger sister, just how am I supposed to not be filled with gleeful expectation?

It definitely wasn't that I was thinking about getting myself into some sort of questionable relationship like something out of an 18+ game, instead, the two of us would be spotted by some fellow classmates while strolling through the streets together and I would cry something like "No! You don't understand! She's just my sister!", and if I bring a girlfriend home, my little sister would become pouty and jealous and refuse to tell what's wrong - yep, it was merely these small fragments of happiness and definitely not scenes of sexual assault that had played across my imagination.

That was naive.

Even now, I remember it as if it was just yesterday. The day I met my new family, at the restaurant that Mr. Sonomiya dragged us to, Kazuha Sonomiya's gaze was downcast, and she never once met my eyes. Kazuha, with the white uniform of the private girl's junior high school hugging her form, was small and fair, her eyes lashes were long and she was probably pretty cute if she would smile, but I had no way to confirm that.

In any case, during that entire near-three-hour meal, I fully saw Kazuha's face only twice, and during both times, her expression was the sort of frightened wariness that one would wear after being approached by a pervert molester in a public train.

But of course, I can't just blame Kazuha. Her mother had died, after all, just a short two years ago. And so Kazuha probably was swimming in a sea of emotions regarding her father and this remarriage.

On top of that, she was forced to meet up with random boys she didn't know. It was obvious she couldn't accept it all just because she was told "These guys are, from today on, your older brothers." Nevertheless, though, Mr. Sonomiya was desperately trying to have his daughter join the conversation, asking her questions and whatnot, but realistically, I had a feeling he was just wasting his effort on something simply futile.

And, inevitably, we finished the main course and the adults got up.

With some sort of made-up grown-up reasoning like "You guys probably have things you don't want to say in front of us," our parents left Kazuha and me alone in the restaurant's private dining room together.

Jeez, that was definitely a bad idea.

After we finished eating the ice cream dessert, we sat there for what felt like, in all seriousness, the entire timespan of the birth to eventual death of some star in a distant region of the night sky.

I wracked my brain for something to dispel the crushingly awkward silence that hung stale in the room. Eventually, the first words of something made its way out my mouth.

"...Do you believe in ghosts?"

In retrospect, that was a horrible thing to say.

With that one sentence, the atmosphere, which until now had been threatening to suffocate me with awkwardness, completely froze over, and no matter what I tried afterwards, not even the slightest smidgeon of warmth could be worked back in. This all happened on the last Thursday of March.

The next day, on the eve of the last Sunday of March, I swore to myself I would leave this house and start living by myself.

By the way, if I was asked if I believed in ghosts, I'd probably confess I'm not sure.

For instance, if someone told me that right over there is some earth-bond spirit, I would not believe it for a second, but if one were to say he can feel the left-behind thoughts and feelings of the departed, I'd probably end up thinking it's definitely a possibility. Well, that sort of cognition does exist. It was perfectly normal.

But then, if we were talking about if I wanted to be able to see things like ghosts in real life, then that is a totally different story: it would be a definite no. I really hate those sorts of occult things. If possible, it'll be good if I'd never have to deal with them in my entire life. It scares me, after all.

Misao spoke up, "Now, just what are you saying? You can feel us, right?"

I definitely think so too.

The spirit was called Misao.

The spring break before I was to become a middle school student, the airplane I rode on plunged into the ocean.

It was certainly quite a big incident, of course, it made it onto the news. About half the passengers survived. I can't recall well exactly what had happened during the episode, however, I do remember with vivid detail what happened after I was rescued and rushed to the local hospital; it had been blood-chillingly horrifying.

It was a small hospital close to a port in some foreign country. Because hundreds of crash victims were being stuffed in there all at once, I too had my entire body wrapped up in bandages like a mummy and was stuffed into a small hospital resting room with the others. It didn't hurt too much, bumping into bodies left and right. But in the silence of the night, wailing moans shrilled through the air. The other patients, and the nurses who didn't speak my language, and whatnot withered and decrepit elements loitering in the bleak darkness of the hospital room. They all scared me – they were all terrifying to me.

And what was truly most terrifying was the packet of blood plugged via intravenous into my body and the disturbing realization that I was looking down at it – at myself – from above. Even to the barely elementary school graduate me, I knew this was what they say is the soul's last moments before death. I wondered if I would die... In that hazy dreaming cross-over state, many vague and obscure thoughts assaulted me.

"It's okay."

I think that was the first time I heard Misao, as a spirit, speak to me.

And I quickly came to realize that she was no longer of this world. After all, normal people don't float around in midair, glowing away in the darkness.

This particular Misao seemed a little more adult than usual. How pretty, I thought. And I wasn't scared. After having my plane plunge into the ocean and my life tossed to the verge of death, why should I be shocked to see something like a dead ghost floating above me? I think I laughed at the thought. Yes...Misao was really a beautiful girl.

"Don't be afraid. I'll protect you. And in exchange..."

Well, and that was how Misao became my guardian spirit.

Or, I suppose, that was how I became haunted by Misao.

Today is the first Thursday of April.

With the high school opening ceremony awaiting me tomorrow, today is the last day of spring break.

Three cardboard boxes and one borrowed suitcase.

That was all the luggage I had.

"See you later, Tomo. I have another delivery I need to make, so I can't help. Good luck with the move in!" Oohara's dad, who had helped me drive my stuff over in a dirty van with "Oohara Liquor" written on it, said as he pulled two warm bottles of Cola from the luggage rack and handed them to me.

"Thanks, sir." I said my thanks as I took the bottles, nearly dropping them.

"Ah!" Oohara's dad said with a wide hearty laugh that exposed the whites of his teeth.

"That Apricot guy is going to make me wait for him if I don't go now, so..." With those words, Oohara's dad shut the driver's side door. With a cacophony of clunking and knocking from the beaten engine, the car started and, spewing out toxic deep red exhaust, hurriedly rolled away.

We were left to stand at the doorway, absent-mindedly watching him disappear down the streets.

It was Spring. On the hill-path opposite the busy commercial streets, Sakura petals danced and fluttered in the whirling wind.

"- So that was Oohara family's dad, huh?" My friend, Higuchi, whispered to me after the Oohara car vanished behind the street corner. Snatching a Cola from me, he heaved a hefty sigh.

"Jeez, you really know how to get the scariest people to help you move your luggage. Props to you, man."

"Why? Oohara's dad is good person, you know." I replied. His face looks like someone who would definitely be a yakuza, though.

Misao nodded in agreement next to me. Her slender frame shaking in laughter.

"You're just interested in him, Tomo. You've heard the rumors, that Yamamoto is scared of crossing in front of that shop even to this very day."

"That's Yamamoto's fault, you know. Plus it was he who had started the fight."

Higuchi shrugged but said nothing. This Yamamoto was a fellow student at our middle school, he was the same grade as us and was a low-grade judo fighter. In the second year of middle school, he was something of a giant weighing over 100 kilograms (220 pounds). That guy, wearing the middle school uniform, strutted into Oohara's liquor store wanting to buy alcohol and got into a fight with the man.

Yamamoto refused to tell anyone much about what happened after that.

Most of the eye witness, however, claim that Yamamoto, with his face swelling with bruises, ran out of the store and was, for some reason, crying and screaming while wearing nothing but a pair of panties.

Well, whatever really happened is up to debate, but in any case, ever since then, the name "Old Man Oohara" became synonymous with terror to kids the likes of Yamamoto.

As a result, I had two reasons why I became rather famous. Number one, I was some sort of fearless weirdo that worked part time at the Oohara Terror shop. Number two, I was being haunted by ghosts.

"Well, whatever. Get moving putting the boxes away." Higuchi finished his cola first, stood up kicked aside a cardboard box on the floor.

My fingers still on the pull tab of the bottle, I stopped and looked at him, "Higuchi?"

"Hm? You want me to help you move?" Higuchi, with his eyes wide and clueless, stared at me as if to add, "I didn't sign up for that."

Then, what the hell did you come here for, jeez.

"If you're not going to help, then just go home. You also owe me a coke. Anyway, didn't some junior girl say she liked you the other day and weren't you planning to go see a movie with her?"

"Fool! Who the hell would go see a movie instead of his friend, who according to rumor, is moving into some haunted house? Besides, doesn't this place have a mountain-load of rumors about monster sightings and unexplained hauntings?"

"How about you stop staining the names of other people's boarding homes...Also, stop spreading these rumors."

"Alright, how about we check if those stories are really just rumors or not. Anyway, I'll need to install a camera in your yard."

"No. And stop spouting off about those pointless things and help me out already." I turned to Higuchi and handed over a cardboard box. I swore to myself that, even if Higuchi ran to me bursting out in tears because he got dumped, I'm definitely not involving myself with him in the future.

In reality, Higuchi, for whatever reason, was often dumped. In fact, on average, he is rejected by his love interests about five times a year. For Higuchi, everything from his first impression to the

content of his conversations is irritatingly problematic. He had something of an obsession with the supernatural and the occult.

Even though he treats me with the friendly casualness as one would a friend, Higuchi only approached me in the first place because he heard a rumor that I was haunted by a spirit.

Basically, Higuchi talks about only occult-related crap to even girls; on his first dates, nonstop conversations about demons, UMAs, aliens, and the like would drone on and on and, no matter how good-looking his face might be, everyone backed off. Then he would probably go back to digging up more supernatural crap.

"Shit, this is heavy. What the hell do you have in here?" Higuchi said as he lifted the cardboard box and, with his face in a crooked sneer, looked at me.

"Textbooks, dictionaries, and such. Oh, and the thing all the new students received at the E-Dance last week."

"That's all? What about the presents of the guide book to spirit-sightings and city legends that you were suppose to offer me?"

"I disposed of all that sort of stuff ahead of time." I replied and Higuchi's face immediately flashed an enraged color redder than the setting sun.

Spitefully, he glared angrily at a cardboard box innocently labeled "Oranges."

"Then, what about the porno magazines?"

"I don't have things like that."

"Tomo, you're a pretty uptight about stuff like that, aren't you."

"It's not that I'm particularly uptight..."

Normally, one wouldn't mix his porn with his textbook together. And, in any case, something must seriously be wrong with that Higuchi if he was actually expecting someone haunted by ghosts to give him a spirit-sighting guide book as present.

"Tomo, you don't need either one of those things, right? Since I'm here, after all." A teasing voice whispered straight into my head.

What the hell. Don't be saying things that's just going to invite misunderstandings.

Looking up in the direction of the sighing reply, I saw Misao staring off in the distance as if oblivious to the situation.

The Misao I saw now was, probably, about my age - fifteen. A beautiful teenager with her hands stuffed into the pockets of her spring coat.

Noticing my stare, Misao turned to me slowly and smiled.

Without realizing it, my heart fluttered with a flurry of playfulness and I squinted my eyes and stuck out my tongue at her with a "Pei". Between the shifting gaps of her long silky hair, the fluttering petals of the Sakura trees swept past and through.

"...but man, this really is an old house, you know."

Pushing aside the rusted iron gate, Higuchi stepped inside onto the stone pavement of the garden.

The front yard was a dreary place, poorly maintained and lifeless, only a few garden plants were left to sparsely populate the empty enclosure. The small brick house stood at the end of the short stone-paved path. Like Higuchi had said, it was definitely an old place. If I was told by someone that this was some sort of historical cemetery, I probably would've believed it. It looked old enough to have lived through the memories of easily half a century. The place wasn't just old, it was frankly crumbling from age.

"Are you really planning to live in a place like this? Are you going to be okay?" Higuchi asked, crinkling his brow.

Carrying my luggage in one hand, I fished for the gate key. "One of my brothers lived here two years ago. The inside is perfectly alright. Plus the high school is close by."

I produced the olden brass key from my pocket. Instead of a key holder, a small protection pendant was attached to the key...probably just one of bro's particular preferences. I was sure there was no deep meaning or implication behind it.

The house's door's keyhole was thoroughly rusted through, but the key nevertheless turned unexpectedly effortlessly. With a screaming screech akin to something out a horror film, the door opened. Despite the midday sun, the hall, with its storm-shutters closed, was dark. All around, gray specks lay scattered about, shed from the white stucco walls. The light, shining in from the entrance way, glanced off the high ceiling and cast a most ghastly, disturbing, shadow. The billowing wind rushed and fluttered the curtains in rippling waves.

"Ooh, this is great...This place might seriously be haunted. But you'll definitely never be able to get a girl come here, man." Higuchi said excited as he peaked down the dust-stained corridor.

Hearing that, Misao chuckled out loud. And, with some level of sincerity, "A ghost, and a girl, both are already here, you know." She said teasingly.

Higuchi's ears, however, heard none of Misao's soothing, melodiously musical voice.

Even as I glanced at Misao gesturing at herself, I realized if I looked carefully, I could see through her ethereal form. The swirling flower petals, swaying gently downward, did not gather upon her shoulders and instead swept through her and away.

With that thought playing across my mind, I stepped through the doorway and laid down my bags. Definitely, if it wasn't because I had grown accustomed to Misao, I probably would never have built up the guts to live in a place like this.

Still wearing her stylish brown boots, Misao stepped into the house.

I could not hear her footsteps.

Without casting a shadow, Misao walked on tiptoes down the corridor; she floated just a little in the air.

It's been nearly three years since the girl called Misao Minakami went missing because of the airplane crash. In other words, nearly three years has passed since I was first haunted by a ghost named Misao.

However, perhaps it's because Misao became a ghost, her personality hasn't changed at all. In fact, she was actually enjoying her current situation.

Just looking at her, one would ever guess she was a ghost. If anything, one would just assume she was some normal teenage girl. Perhaps if one were to look at her entire body, one might feel something was missing, but unless inspected carefully, one would not notice she was translucent. She even still has legs. She doesn't go out as much as a normal girl would, but she does have a great sense of style and fashion.

From the moment we met in the hospital soon after the plane accident, through my return to Japan, acceptance to and finish from middle school, to right now, the very hour of my middle school graduation. Just why she continued growing up with me at the exact same pace. Just from that reason alone, she is already deviating from the standard image of your average ghost in this world.

Ghosts that grow up. Oh really? Isn't that great. Let us all approve.

The lovable and cute little girl guardian angel-sama grows up and becomes a beautiful teenager. If asked, I suppose it's as fortuitous as it is unfortunate.

Certainly, Misao is cute. It's undoubtedly a blessing to have a girl like her only talk with me and always be by my side.

On the other hand, the reality that no matter how I reach out my hand for her, that I can never cross over to her world is, in a certain sense, terribly heartbreaking.

Those feminine arms and legs, or that deepening cleavage between those breasts, or the fair slender neck, or her well formed lips. The sort of situation where I, an adolescent boy rising into manhood, is forced to always see the siren's allurements, yet never be able to reach out my hands to take is close to waterboarding and torture.

On top of that, even though Misao was well aware of it, she didn't much care about just what her own attractiveness was doing to me: approaching so close her lips nearly brush against me, sideling up next to me while I'm trying to bathe, standing around at such frustrating angles that the fluttering of her skirt would tease me just enough to check if I could see it or not. My god, are you doing this to me on purpose, miss?

Ghosts, by all means, aren't real in the first place and so perhaps Misao's existence can be explained as just some sort of hallucination created in my mind. After all, only I can see Misao, only I can hear Misao.

If I ever went to discuss this with a psychiatrist, they'd probably theorize that I have schizophrenia and thus have a split personality - which in part was caused by a person named Misao.

And probably because of that, I would come off as something of a fragile pansy, and unfortunately, I have no basis to deny that accusation.

Incidentally, I have no real other connection with ghosts or spirits, and, aside from Misao, I've never met another ghost in my life. I might just be overly harsh on myself, thinking this way, but in terms of reality, I really wonder...

"Yeah, I really wonder, too." Misao said and, in a charming manner, purposely unbuttoned the collar of her shirt as if almost inviting me to peek between them.

That's really erotic, so please stop.

"If you can understand it that way, then isn't that good enough?"

It's not fine at all. I don't understand it. In the first place, I really hate pseudoscience like ghosts or the occult. And even if I didn't hate them, there is still that rumor that spread around middle school that I was possessed by ghosts and so there had been a large group of kids at school who, to this very day, are too scared to even come close to me. If things continue on like this, even if I enter high school, I still won't have a chance of getting a girlfriend through normal methods.

And if Misao was truly a real ghost and that her physical body did, in fact, die in the airplane incident, then hasn't three years been long enough for her to hesitate and meander? I think it's about time she found some peace in rest and go to heaven. I know that my hope for something like that was not just for Misao's own sake.

Well...at least until this night, before I met them.

We had started the project of moving in around noon, and with absolutely no thanks to whatever help Higuchi might have provided, and some thanks to Misao's roughly helpful advice of first taking care of the things necessary for daily survival and worrying about cleaning up and ordering up later, we were almost finished with it by the evening.

If nothing else Meioutei¹ was vast. A thorough cleaning of the house probably couldn't finish with even a week.

¹ The Kanji used mean sakura-call residence, however "meioutei", also can be spelled with characters implying hellhole, demon-pit, or Satan house

"...So, how much is the rent for this place?" Higuchi, strewn lazily on the old sofa in the living room sofa, asked.

The rays of the setting sun shone through the open window and plastered onto the wall clock on the opposite with a bright reflective film.

In any case, no matter how much an old building gets cleaned, that tired and wore impression is just never going to be swept out. But once one gets used to it, living here won't be bad at all. The place has the feel of a setting out of 19th century London. It's the sort of atmosphere one would read about in a murder-mystery detective novel. Or perhaps a suspense-horror novel. It's the sort of place a real monster might actually live. So anyway, how much is the rent here?

"I don't think it's that expensive, but I'm not sure. My brother is paying for it." Actually, I was just told I could use this place while he was out. He probably didn't think I'd actually come and live here.

"Tomo, your brother is in America right now, right?"

"Yeah." I nodded. Then, something popped up in my thoughts, "Actually, I'm not sure...he recently sent me a poster card from India..."

"What the hell? Didn't he call you from North America just a little while ago?" Higuchi looked up, his brow furrowed doubtfully, "...Yeah, I don't really understand what's going on with these super-smart people."

Yeah, I feel completely the same.

I've been told my brother, Naotaka Natsume was, from childhood, extremely intelligent.

Since middle school, he's been submitting scholarship papers and winning tens of thousands of yen in scholarships. When he became a college student, he had turned all that into cash and flew out the nest, where he was easily accepted into studying abroad.

Ever since, whenever he felt like he had time to waste on me, he would call internationally; I, on the other hand, had no way of contacting him. Maybe he told mom his address and email, but I didn't know. At first, I was completely unsatisfied, but recently, I've had cause to change my mind a little. Probably in order for my born-genius older brother to actually be a good older brother, he had to be paying more attention to me. I suppose some people could say we were lost on how to bridge that gap between us siblings...No, that's probably not it. It's just him.

"Ann-chan is here!" Misao snuck up on me and whispered into my ear I held a wet wiping cloth in my hands absent-mindedly. Then, the slightly late and incredibly dull sounding door chime rang. Maybe the batteries are running out.

I returned the cloth to its bucket, washed my hands in the restroom, and, wearing slippers I brought my real home, I headed toward the entrance. The door opened with a screech at its hinges and, standing outside, was a short-haired cheerful young girl who looked at me with a pouty expression. Her name is Ann Oohara; classmates from back in middle school.

"Took you long enough, Tomo!" Ann said as she shoved into my arms a three-layered new-year's meal box and a bottle of orange juice.

"What's this? Whoa, what's in here?" The boxes were surprisingly heavy.

"Dad told me to bring you some dinner. Are you done moving in?" Without waiting for me to say "well, pretty much", Ann barged into the house.

Looking down the corridor at the candle-holder shaped light bulbs, she blew a small whistle as if to say Aha! "This is amazing! I've heard people talk about it, but this place feels incredibly rustic and antique. It's called Meioutei?"

"Right. My brother called it that." Meioutei was the name of this rather western-styled house. And,

actually, there really was a splendid Sakura tree standing dead center in the backyard that, even now, was blooming with vibrant vivaciousness².

"Maybe it has a corpse buried at its roots." Misao giggle as she whispered into my ear.

I looked up at her with a horrified expression. Seriously, stop saying things like that! If because of nothing else than you, yourself, are a ghost.

Ann, who didn't seem at all frightened, occasionally breathed "Uwa - " and exclaimed "Hya-!" as she walked down the corridor. When she peaked into the living room, she blinked in mild surprise, "Ooh? Higuchi! You're here too!"

"Hnn?" Higuchi lazily propped himself up and, without much emotion in his voice, "Oh, it's just Oohara. What are you here for? It's a bit too late for little girls to be wandering around outside."

I think the fact he speaks with such a carelessly condescending tone even to girls that he really likes, is the reason why that Higuchi has never even once gone out on a real second date.

"What's with the attitude? Especially when people go out of their way to bring food for you!"

"Eh? Really? I was wrong about you, Oohara. You're the greatest!" Turning around backwards to a fresh new attitude, Higuchi jumped off the sofa.

I continued arranging the food onto the table in the living room – I have yet to clean the dining room.

"Where are the cups...?" I whispered softly, too quietly for Higuchi and Ann to hear.

Misao nodded, "I don't know about cups, but I saw a beaker in the next room."

Beaker, huh. It's certainly usable as a cup. Well, it should be fine as long as no one used it to store weird drugs or whatever.

"It's okay. I'll be here with you."

What the heck is that? How does that resolve anything? Besides, Misao, are you sure you're not mistaking "be here with" with "possessing"?

Misao's personality had been like that since forever; whenever my judgment was at a loss, I would always be swayed over by her opinion. I mean, I know that if I ended up failing because of it, I would be the one who suffered the consequences, but once one is fixed in his or her role of listening to someone else it becomes incredibly difficult to break free. Just how many times did I get myself into a sticky situation even though Misao told me "I'll be with you, so it'll be fine."? I headed over to the next room, mumbling to myself over that matter.

That room was, apparently, a work room my brother used for his various hobbies.

The interior was dreary with specialized tools and machines were strewn about. Like Misao had said; beakers of various sizes and shapes lined the medicine cabinet next to the nearby wall. Now that I think about it, my brother really used a lot of armies and remote-controlled helicopters in this room. Then he would burst out of here with his homemade airsoft guns blazing; dropping bombs and firing rounds at me, who was then just a small child. Those were horrible times.

I picked three seemingly usable beakers from the shelf and turned to go back to the living room when I suddenly noticed it.

There was a strange lid covering something on the workshop floor. What is that? I thought with a flutter of interest. On top of the lid there was a distinct insertion slit for a key. More than a just a lid, this thing looked more like a door.

"Hmm...basement, maybe?" Misao suggested in a light tone.

² Remember that the character for Sakura tree is in Meioutei.



I tilted my head, but didn't reply. No one ever said we had something like that here.

For no particular reason, I found myself incredibly interested. It's fine if it's just a storage room, but what should I do if there was really something like a dead body in there? What if I'm going to hear the cries and moans of demon spirits in the middle of the night? Surely, Higuchi's whole rhetoric about monsters can't possibly be anything but lies.

"Tomo, what are you doing? If you don't come back soon we'll finish eating everything!" Ann's voice echoed in from the living room.

Even though Ann was a girl she sure could eat, and Higuchi eats like an overworked, starved carriage horse. Leaving those two alone with food really could mean they would even eat my portion and finish everything. Am I really going to have nothing left?

"Wait! Seriously, just what did you two come here for?!"

Hugging the beakers, I hurriedly rushed back down the corridor. Misao stared at the door at her feet for just a little while longer before giving a shrug and turning to chase after me.

There after, in the span of thirty minutes two newspaper salesmen came by.

Ann greeted them for me. Maybe it was because she had been watching her father work since a young age, but she was surprisingly good with this sort of social interaction. In an overly friendly tone, her non-stop, one-sided chatting dropped whatever sales pitch for laundry detergent or baseball tickets the salesman might have prepared and slowly scared the guy away. I think that is a wonderful talent to have.

Ann was Oohara Liquor's self-proclaimed poster girl. In addition to being classmates, we also became fellow employees, she's my senior there at the Oohara store.

Ever since the proud, physically invincible old man Oohara strained his back and asked Ann for help I had began working at the store three days a week. I have no idea just what they actually thought about a middle school student working at a liquor store but the teachers at school seemed to have figured I was just helping out with the family business and overlooked the issue.

"But, Tomo, Dad says if your club activities conflict with your job you don't have to worry about the shop. Since you're in high school, you might as well enjoy doing things that only high schoolers can do." Ann said, happily stuffing her face with fried chicken.

"Clubs, huh..." I mused, tumbling around an asparagus roll in my mouth. Hmm, I thought, the spices making some sort of flavour dance, delicious.

"Tomo, you're really going to join a club or something?" Higuchi asked, as if truly mystified by the idea.

At that point, Ann cut in, "Ah! I made that egg roll, is it good?"

"A little too sweet... It's not that I don't want to join one, it's just that there isn't a club that I'm really interested in."

However, I don't have a hobby and the days of no work in addition to no club activities would just pile up becoming tedious. It's not like I have a girlfriend to go out with or the money to go out and play by myself.

And, more than anything else: I didn't want Misao to grow bored.

It's pretty understandable considering she's the ghost haunting me but Misao, who obviously had a lot of time on her hands, would often involve herself in my business. And if I ignored her she would, of course, get angry. As a ghost, Misao wasn't particularly powerful; she was, after all, no violent poltergeist who would rampage about and damn people. Instead, Misao would often whisper whimsically in my ear reminders of all my past failures, all of which she remembered well. If I could, I wanted to avoid such situations.

"Anything will do. Join the track club with me Tomo, you're pretty fast aren't you?"

Well yes, I was good at running. It was one of the few things I could actually compete with against my brother.

"Uh, don't. It's sweaty and it sucks. How about you join the go-home-club, you live alone, anyway, why waste that?"

"Stuffing yourself in a crumbling house like this isn't good for you! It's bad for your health, you know. Some creepy girl might crawl out of the old abandoned well and kill you or some murderer might spring out from under your bed and butcher you, you know."

"What are you, stupid? He'll be fine even if that was the case. Besides, Tomo is possessed by ghosts anyway and it shouldn't be a problem if one or two more monsters join up with him."

'What the hell kind of reasoning is that?' I thought to myself. Misao bared her teeth at Higuchi and glared at him angrily.

"Only Higuchi would say something like that," Ann said, biting on tsukemono³. Ann didn't believe in ghosts.

Even though she always called herself my guardian spirit, Misao had none of the powers a ghost would likely have. Of course possession and cursing all go out the window. It probably has something to do with her personality. Dark and malicious actions like that were bad for making friends.

Thus people only suspected my possession because suspicious videos and photos were taken of me, and that had been the direct reason why the whole rumor about me being haunted by spirits came about. There isn't much more basis for it though than that and consequently I was classified under the possessed-but-harmless weirdo group at school. At the very least I was able to make friends with people like Ann, who did not believe in the existence of ghosts.

"How about joining the drama club, Tomo?" Out of nowhere, Higuchi suggested suddenly and randomly, "According to my sources, there isn't a single guy in the drama club so if you join you can easily be the male lead in anything!"

"That won't work! There's no way Tomo can act! There's just no way he could be a prince or something."

"If prince is no good, there are other roles. Like the princess or a corpse."

"Hmm! I kind of want to see him as a princess."

No way in hell. And anyway, I didn't say a single thing about wanting to join the drama club.

I guess it just has to be track then. No, the film club! Higuchi and Ann completely ignored me and my opinions and continued to argue over the matter while I stared at the three-layered dinner boxes and ate a sandwich.

"Tomo," Misao drifted down lightly and land on my shoulders, "Someone's coming. A weird one."

"Eeh? Who is it?" I said aloud without thinking. Higuchi and Ann, with mystified looks on their faces, turned to look at me. They could not hear Misao's voice.

Before suspicion could settle in, the dull doorbell rang from the entrance way.

"Another newspaper salesman? Hey, Oohara!"

"Leave it to me!" Ann, responding to Higuchi's call, stood up energetically and dashed to the door.

Misao folded her arms across her chest, deep in thought, "Hmm...certainly didn't look like a newspaper salesman..."

³ Tsukemono are various pickled Japanese vegetables.

Maybe it's the milk man or a security guard. Maybe a member of the neighborhood watch. It's probably nothing we should be worried about.

But then again, Ann seemed unusually quiet out there.

"Tomo, come here for a second, please."

Ann came back a short while later and beckon for me from the end of the corridor, a sort of discouraged disappointment apparent on her face. "I think we have a guest..."

I wonder who? There are only a handful of people who would know I moved in here today. Ann's dad, my mom, Mr. Sonomiya and Kazuha Sonomiya. It would be great if Kazuha came but that's not very likely. There's no reason for her to visit me. Or perhaps she is coming to patch things up with me...well, probably not.

"Uwaa..." Misao breathed in admiration.

A young lady, whom I had never met before, stood at the door.

She was tall, stylish, and slender. Wearing her high-heeled boots, she stood taller than me.

Even though it was April, she wore a full winter coat. The coat was jet black. Her long straight hair was jet black. Everything about her was black. She looked like a witch.

The only piece of color she had on her was the bright red frame of her glasses which somehow made its surroundings less stern and serious.

Underneath her glasses, she was a full-blown, heartbreakingly beautiful woman.

"She's pretty, isn't she? Tomo, you really fall head-over-heels for people like that, don't you?"

I was flustered that Misao was right on the bull's-eye. Maybe it's the repression from my extremely capable brother working my cognition or perhaps I'm just weak to beautiful older women, but all my resistances instantly burned away. Misao clearly didn't sound too happy about that.

Certain if we were just comparing looks, Misao wouldn't lose so easily, but I never really thought of Misao as an older woman figure. If anything, she was more like a twin sister: and a ghost. Moreover, how should I put this... Misao had none of that erotic sexiness that seemed to exude from this other girl.

"Good evening. I suppose I should also say 'pleased to meet you.' For the sake of my task I want to just confirm you are Naotaka's younger brother, right?" The black-clad woman asked.

Instantly, I felt all the random thoughts and feelings that had played across my mind sink away. Oh, I see. So the beautiful lady is just an acquaintance of my brother. This suddenly got a lot less interesting.

"Umm, I'm sorry but my brother hasn't came back from studying abroad yet," it's not that I did anything particularly wrong I need to say sorry for, but I figured I might as well apologize anyway.

If I got her hopes up that maybe Naotaka was coming back, then I was so terribly sorry.

However, the lady did not seem especially downcast or disappointed; instead she smiled faintly as she studied me.

I was beginning to get a bad feeling in the bit of my stomach and I was at a loss for what to do.

This person might be beautiful, but she was also a bit weird. It's hard to put a finger on it, but there is definitely something strange about her.

"I know what you're thinking."

"Huh?"

"I too am an acquaintance of Naotaka. And I didn't come here to meet him. I have need of you,

Tomoharu Natsume."

"Eh, me?"

I was so surprised I used "Ore" without thinking⁴.

The lady nodded, "Naotaka asked me to do this: If you were to ever move into this house, I was to entrust this to you."

"Oh."

Entrust. What? I realized I needed to ask.

An oddly out-of-place suitcase stood at the feet of the black-clad woman.

It seemed big enough to be used for travelling and the surface shone with a glossy metallic brilliance.

"Here," She brought the suitcase up and handed it over to me as I stared in bewilderment.

"Um, what?!"

As a result of taking that suitcase, I lost my balance and nearly fell over.

Since she had handed it over with such ease I didn't expect it to be so ridiculously heavy. I could barely lift the thing with both hands even though I was pretty confident in my physical strength from working at the liquor store.

"It's in your care now. Make sure you take care of it, okay?" She said in a stern tone.

Instead of heeding her words, I dropped the suitcase at my feet. "Wait a second. What is this thing? And who are you? When the hell did my brother ask you to do something like this?"

As far as I know, Naotaka left Japan only last summer and hasn't come back since. Has this girl has been holding on to this piece of luggage for the whole time? Or maybe he already came back. If that was the case, why didn't he just give this to me in person instead of asking her to do it?

"Don't ever lose track of this thing - it is extremely important for everyone. Even for yourself." She warned, completely ignoring my questions.

Even if you tell me that, just what the hell am I suppose to do to it?

The suitcase entrusted to me wasn't just incredibly heavy, it was also made of something extremely tough - both the handle and the case itself were made from metal. The thing was closed so tightly together I couldn't tell where it was supposed to open. The outside was mechanical with slightly rusted thick bolts on its surface, with strange brown spots strewn about. I had no idea when this thing could have been made.

One thing was definite though: the case seemed extremely valuable and costly. I wouldn't have been surprised if there were stacks of bank notes inside there. Actually, I'd be fairly grateful if that was the case.

A thought ran across my mind and captured my imagination: what if there were weapons or dangerously suspicious white powder inside? What would I do then? I shuddered in fright at the thought. Just what the hell are you mixed up in while running around outside the country, bro?

"Umm...I'm sorry but can I return this to you?" I asked, nervously.

"No. If you don't hold onto it then there is absolutely no point." She said with a slightly scary glint in her eyes.

I was becoming increasingly more panicky. What the hell do you mean "no point?" I thought I just

⁴ TL note: Unlike English which has at most three ways to address one's self - I, me, and myself - in Japanese, there are a lot more ranging from the standard watashi to the almost unused sessha. Ore is simply another way to address one's self in Japanese; it is considered slightly vulgar and therefore exclusively by men.

had to keep this for you for a while. Like, until I give it back to you after the time is up or when you want it back.

"Um...this really did belong to my brother, right?" I asked persistently.

I probably had a pretty pathetic expression on my face then because her stern look loosened and she laughed, "nope."

Eeh. My finger tips shook and I gripped the suitcase so tight that my knuckles turned white. So this really is stolen goods, then? I flashed the lady a look of terror and astonishment.

I was getting a horrible feeling about this.

I looked up at her, but she didn't meet my stare.

Underneath those red-framed spectacles her eyes stared directly upward above my shoulder at the ceiling.

But before that:

"Tomo, this person..." Misao's voice shook.

The black-clad woman's eyes without doubt or hesitation, locked upward straight toward Misao. To Misao, who couldn't be seen by anyone else except me.

"This from the beginning, belonged only to you guys", she stated clearly. She then turned on her heels, her back to us. Her coat fluttered wildly in the wind like a witch's cape as she walked away.

Misao and I stared after her in shock and astonishment.

Afterwards only the silver-colored suitcase was left at my feet.

"Hey, so who was that person just now?" Ann, sitting on her knees on the couch asked as I returned to the living room. Her big pretty eyes were sparkling with curiosity but a look of slight worry was on her face.

"She was friggin' hot. Who was she?" Higuchi asked. His eyes too, were glittering with wolfish lust. I suppose he was peeking earlier.

"Hey, what's with the suitcase? What's in it?"

"Let's open it and see, should be fine, right?"

The two of them then proceeded to drown me out with a steady flood of questions about the incident. When I realized that I couldn't answer a single one of them a shiver of shock ran down my spine. Now that I think about it, I even forgot to ask for her name. Was she even really my brother's acquaintance?

'My brother's acquaintance', those words have a horrible ring to them; they were the causes of many dark times in my past.

I had been an idiot the day I became a middle school student – I had told Naotaka about Misao.

The next day, Naotaka brought over three older woman – his acquaintances – who were cognitive-psychology students. The three women stripped me naked and forced me down on what could only be described as a surgical table and then proceeded to, for the purpose of investigation, insert all sorts of strange metallic instruments into whatever holes and or orifices on my body and ran electricity through them, all the while pounding me with over 500 questions all of which I had to respond with "no". For half a year afterwards I was traumatized and pathologically scared by all serious-minded and stern-looking girls.

The year after, Naotaka dragged me to a strange and suspicious martial artist, whose name I didn't know, for training. Somewhere during that interim I was thoroughly beaten down and knocked out to the point I couldn't recall what happened three days thereafter.

A meeting with Naotaka's acquaintances has never, not even once, ended without me going through all sorts of intense pain and suffering.

Rushed by Ann and Higuchi, I chucked the suitcase down on the living room floor. The more I look at it, the more suspicious it gets. It looked like the sort of thing the Apollo 11 astronauts would've used to bring back lunar rocks, but it's probably a little too late for that.

"Maybe there's a biological weapon in there." Higuchi said jokingly. I found myself unable to laugh.

Well, there isn't a biological radiation sign or serial number on the case. Whether that's good enough a reason to feel safe was a bit too early to say. But if that was the case, then, maybe I shouldn't have thrown it onto the ground so violently earlier.

"So, how do we open this?" Ann asked, shaking and hitting the case.

I don't think you should be treating it so roughly, Ann. But because I was afraid that mentioning the elephant in the room might cause it to go crazy, I remained silent.

But Ann does have a point. The case's surface was flat and there didn't seem to be any hidden switch, keyhole, or place to enter the combination to open the thing.

"Maybe they use remote control to open this thing," Higuchi said without a sense of responsibility.

Ann, giving up, sighed, and laughed a little, "I've never heard of a remote-control bag like that. Besides, it's not like this is a bomb..." Ann's laughing tone dropped below a whisper midway through.

Now that I think about it, the news did mention a while back that instead of being scared of terrorist missiles delivering in nukes, rather, we should be scared of terrorists nowadays using suitcases to smuggle nuclear warheads into the country.

"..."

A thick white lace of silence hung stale in the room; everyone subconsciously glanced away from the suitcase.

I gave Misao a brief look. Since she was a ghost, surely she could easily peak into the sealed-shut case and see.

"Can't." Misao, however, shook her head from side to side.

In any case, it seems even Misao can't get into that trunk. Either that, or the inside of the case was pitch black and she couldn't see anything anyway.

I sighed deeply, "The next time my brother calls I'll ask him what's inside." I have no idea when that is going to be though, I thought, but didn't say.

Preferably, it'll be nice if he called before I get blown up into chunks of raw meat. On the other hand, maybe there is only some special North American-only fruit in there...which would've gone rotten by now. Or maybe it's my brother's comfort blanket. In a certain sense, that might be worse than a nuclear blanket!

Whenever I looked at that mysterious trunk, I'd start to feel depressed, so I picked up the trunk and carried it out of the living room again. I lugged the thing over to the northern-most room, which I had designated for storage and left it next to the cardboard boxes that had already served their purpose in helping me move.

Then, the dull door bell rang once again. It was the third salesman today.

When the door of the storage room shut, a cardboard box tumbling in the draft, fell over. The box labelled "oranges" conveniently covered up the suitcase. However, I noticed none of this and instead headed toward the entrance. Outside the windows the sky was already dark. Today is the last day of spring and that was going to end in just a few moments. However, I had no idea today was

also the last day of my peaceful and uneventful life, which will also end in just a few moments. Just not yet.

However, the wheels of fate are beginning to spin.



Chapter 2

The hour hand of the clock crossed the twelve-mark; with that, the date advanced.

I woke up on the first Friday of April, only to be met by the still-dark sky in the wee hours of the morning.

Outside, it was still wispy-dark; inside, the room was dimly lit, as the cheap curtains were unable to completely block the street and city lights outside.

To my right, about three centimeters in the air above my bed, was Misao, breathing in the slow steady rhythm of sleep. One of the few actual ghost-like powers that Misao had was her ability to freely turn invisible, which left me with few chances to see her dozing face. Occasionally though, like at this very moment, Misao let down her guard enough to reveal her defenseless sleeping form.

When Misao slept, she typically only wore a simple, white, and slightly-translucent shirt which could be considered to be little more than a piece of cloth. Whatever it was that she wore, it seemed to be her default attire or something.

Whenever Misao took a breath, the soft and artistically-drawn curves of her chest rose and fell, exposing her neck and her back at different angles. Like a baby, she slept curled up, revealing the milky-white creamy softness of her thighs. All in all, the view was intoxicatedly tantalizing.

Sufficed to say, I couldn't sleep, and the view didn't help.

In the darkness, I turned my attention to stare dully at the analog clock and its hands, which showed that it was half-past three. It was the dead of night; but for some irritatingly mysterious reason, I couldn't fall back asleep.

Out of nowhere, a screeching sound echoed down from above, startling me.

This place was old, I told myself. The creaking wood could have been caused by the humidity or by the temperature changing just the right way. I could rationalize my surroundings, but the fact that I was just not used to it still made it all a little scary. It didn't help that the sounds that echoed down sounded almost like footsteps either.

"Nn..." Misao breathed, causing me to look directly at her. She had turned just enough so that the view of her collar bone and cleavage pierced directly into my eyes. That nearly-translucent cloth served to only highlight the curvy outline of her body even more.

Is she wearing anything underneath that? I thought to myself.

I sighed. There was no way I could sleep like this. Plus, now I needed to go to use the bathroom too.

I rolled off of the futon, which was finally delivered last night, and headed out of the room and down the hallway. The room I had claimed as my own faced southeast on the second floor, but it felt more like an attic than anything else. In addition to that, if I were to talk about the problems with this room, the biggest one was that the restroom was too far away. I rubbed my eyes as I descended the treacherous decline. On my way down, I slipped and barely kept myself from falling down the stairs.

When I reached the bottom, thankfully safe and sound, I stopped and shivered. It was April, but the nights were still cold. The wintry and hoary rays of the moonlight pierced into the living room through the open door and chillingly lit the hallway.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar dark shadow sliced silently through the pale silver rays of moonlight that filtered into the living room.

"Eh?" I gasped in surprise.

But before another word could escape my mouth, I was shoved forcefully against the wall.

My voice wouldn't come; my body couldn't move. Is this kanashibari⁵ I thought to myself numbly in my state of drowsiness.

While in my drowsy state, I ruled out being possessed by a spirit or something similar, since I couldn't detect the presence of any at all. Although, even if I had never experienced it before, I didn't think the force of a kanashibari would be this violently strong...

Whatever it was, I couldn't breathe, and the back of my head hurt from being slammed into the wall. Even if I had my doubts, I nevertheless concluded that there wasn't any explanation other than kanashibari either.

Then again, it helped that the proof that this was kanashibari was right before my eyes: in front of me, the spirit of a young girl stood there.

It was also notable that a part of me felt that there was a little something about her aura that reminded me of Misao...

But I knew immediately that she wasn't Misao. She was someone else. Misao would have never glared at me with such terrifying eyes. Hovering brightly against the darkness, the color of each individual eye differed: jet-black and emerald-green. Had it not been due to the contrasting darkness, I would've never even noticed the difference, and wouldn't have thought it was anything out of the ordinary.

But this person definitely wasn't human; at least I had managed to grasp that idea.

Leaving the situation as it was, I couldn't help but realize that I had been meeting nothing but vengeful, yet damned pretty, ghosts. Misao was, if I had to say, a western-style teenage beauty, whereas this one in front of me was more of the traditional kind. Her nose-bridge was prim and proper⁶, her eyelashes were long, and she was wearing a traditional kimono. White robes and a crimson shirt; it was something one would see a miko⁷ wear at a shrine during hatsumoude⁸, so it was most definitely a miko dress. But for some reason, I was getting a sinking feeling about all of this.

Why was a ghost-miko popping up in a western-style house?

As that thought bounced in my head, my temporarily-forgotten terror suddenly began to ripple through and out of my spine.

This Meioutei was definitely an old western-style house. For all I knew, having ghosts popping out all over was commonplace. I was starting to believe I might have seen this place introduced in a magazine sometime ago. There could be a dead body buried beneath the Sakura tree. There could be a hidden underground basement where there could be monsters being raised. But no matter how one thought about it, a miko dress was still out of place here.

"Where is... the Asura Machina?"

I didn't understand what she was saying. Asuramakina? It was the first time I had ever heard those words. Was it some famous cuisine from some random country? Something like Kima curry⁹ or

5 "kanashibari" refers to the binding of one's hands and feet by usually unseen forces such as a ghost or poverty. Unfortunately, there's no good English equivalent that will do this term justice, so it is left as is.

6 "hanasuji ga sukkiri to totte" is a compliment used to describe a feature that Japanese would find beautiful, but it is not the kind of compliment you would hear in English.

7 "Miko" refers to the priestesses at Shinto shrines. While in Anime they are seen only sweeping the shrine campus for an indeterminate amount of time, in real life they have other duties - namely overseeing the events of hatsumoude.

8 "Hatsumoude" is, of course, the tradition when, at the turn of a new year, Japanese people visit their local Shinto shrine and participate in such traditions such as raffled luck-drawings, praying to god, and jeering at lolis.

9 "Kima curry" is a type of curry that uses ground beef as its main ingredient.

Sata andagi¹⁰?

More startling than her question, however, was the explosive strength her arms, which I had just begun to notice.

The miko's thin fingers gripped my throat in an unbelievably tight stranglehold. Without an extraordinary effort of strength and will, I wasn't able to move my body at all. This was probably what I had mistaken for kanashibari.

Those arms... That strength...

Prickling sirens flashed painfully across the surface of my oxygen-deprived cerebral cortex.

Wait a minute. She was touching me with that arm. She was no ghost!

"Uwaaah!" the pathetic scream escaped out of my lips. In an instant, my drowsy, sleepy consciousness snapped wide awake. My assumption had been wrong. I had gotten used to the idea of meeting spirits and ghosts, but that didn't mean I couldn't meet other monsters.

For the first time, I met a vengeful spirit that was not Misao and I still couldn't believe the reality of this situation. I couldn't comprehend at all why this was happening to me. I was completely panic-stricken.

"Please hand over the extractor. Its existence is dangerous. Because it's dangerous, you mustn't hold onto it."

I completely failed to comprehend what she was saying.

Countless questions kept on rolling around in my head. What was this girl? How did she get in here? Why was she dressed like that? What was her motive...?

My vision was fading to black rapidly as my consciousness slipped toward darkness. Not enough oxygen... My remaining fragments of strength were slipping right out through my legs. "Aaah..."

After a long while, the miko finally realized that I was near collapse and loosened the grip of her left hand from around my neck and let me breathe again.

Slowly, the oppressive weakness that permeated my body gradually faded away. Instinctively, I thought to run away – to escape – from her, but my exhausted legs felt like lead and I couldn't take even a single step.

A shaky, swooning sensation began flooding through me, but fortunately the miko caught me as I swayed forward and fell face-first.

Her boobs were soft.

Although it was not noticeable from the clothes she was wearing, this girl had surprisingly large breasts, especially given her slender figure. Unfortunately, I couldn't afford the luxury of enjoying the sensation at the moment. The fact was, I had nearly suffocated to death and was barely conscious anyway. At the same time, it didn't seem like the girl realized just what state and position I had fallen into either.

"Where is the Asura Machina?" she repeated, as if oblivious to my state.

Her question barely registered and all I could focus on was the girl's body. Even though her body temperature was cooler than mine, she felt snug and warm. Needless to say, her hair also smelled pleasant. But, due to oxygen-deprivation, my head felt numb and thick. Maybe all of this was just a dream. In the middle of the night, some beautiful girl dressed like a Shinto miko suddenly shows up, and I ended up with my face in her boobs; even suffocation somehow seemed like a too-good-

10 "Sata Andagi" is a dish native to Okinawa, but also popular in Hawaii. They are deep fried buns, similar to donuts but in a ball-like shape.

to-be-true situation. This was the sort of dream boys would have during puberty. If I just continued to live this dream, it certainly would have felt great. On the other hand, it might also prove to be exceptionally dangerous...

If I somehow managed to see the morning, I'd have to figure out how to wake up without disturbing Misao, since I'd have to sneak out and secretly wash my underpants.

"Tomo!" I heard Misao call out my name.

In an instant, I snapped back to life out of my stupor, similar to how one would after being smacked by the P.E. teacher for sneaking a nap during morning salutations¹¹. The pseudo-miko, hearing Misao's voice, loosened her grip completely and jumped back.

She wasn't going to chase me.

Misao flew straight down from the corridor ceiling and drifted further downward into sight of the pseudo-miko. The pseudo-miko froze in an expression of disbelief.

Her black and green eyes went wide in shock and surprise.

"Aaa! Body projection...?!"

"Eeh? What? Who?" It was now Misao's turn to be taken by surprise.

Until today, there was no one who had been surprised by seeing Misao. Of course, this was probably because there was no one else besides me who was able to see her. But in just the span of a few hours there were now two more that could: the black-clad woman from earlier this evening, and this girl.

Misao turned towards me with a troubled expression. But even if she looked at me with that expression, it didn't change the troubling facts of the situation.

The pseudo-miko's eyes flashed in my direction as well. Why did she look like she was about to burst into tears? It was the first time I had ever seen such a pretty girl make such a face. Regardless of what sort of monster this girl might be, I still felt a twinge of surprise run through me.

A seemingly infinitely long time passed between the three of us where none of us moved, collectively frozen in surprise.

The pseudo-miko girl recovered first, however. All of a sudden, with a "poof" sound, the pseudo-miko girl tapped the air and her body flipped backwards.

Pushing off hard against living room floor, she leapt toward the closed window. At the instant I thought she would crash through the glass, a brilliant flash of white sparked from her left hand.

She had extended her fingers and drew a glyph in mid-air, which began to give off a scarlet glow in the darkness.

In the next instant...

"Uwaa?!"

A flash of searing light, followed by the blast of an explosion, rippled through. Instinctively, I ducked and covered my head, overtaken by surprise.

As if in the midst of an earthquake, the foundations of the crumbling Meioutei rocked and shook. A gust of warm air blew past and fluttered the unkempt bangs of my hair. The cracked walls, loosened and damaged, shed their stucco coverings like drops of mud onto the hallway floor.

"What was that... just now?" Misao asked, her eyes wide, when the shaking finally subsided.

¹¹ In certain Asian schools, each morning starts with all the students saluting the school colors or something like that in the field. In Communist China, for instance, the students of the olden days may have been forced to salute the party, bow to Mao, etc.

I shook my head and said nothing.

Through the completely-obliterated living room window, I could see the faintly visible rays of the brightening dawn sky, along with the dancing petals of the Sakura tree. The fake-miko was nowhere in sight.

My legs gave out from underneath me and I crumpled down onto the living room floor, coughing. My throat, at the spot where the girl had strangled me, was dull red. A lingering, beating heat burned my skin from where her thin fingers had touched.

It wasn't a dream.

Even now, the sweet scent of her hair and the sound of her voice were still lingering in my nose and ears.

Asura Machina. Body projection. Those words echoed in my head.

"Hey, Tomo, why were you hugging that girl just now?" Misao's voice was a quiet whisper in my head.

I guess that it really looked like we were hugging, even if there was a little bit of strangling involved too. Not that I could have said that to Misao, even if I wanted to. It's not like she would listen to me, anyway. It would just end up making Misao even angrier. And Misao would be certain to be "interested" in the "faint sensation of her breasts." Ah, Misao, why should there be a problem? You're a ghost after all...

Just how am I going to cover up for this one? I wondered to myself.

In a light and playful voice, Misao asked, "...did it feel good?" Contrary to her tone, however, I felt Misao's eyes, narrowed and humorless, bore into my back with a sulky peevish fury.

I sighed, but remained quiet.

The bike my brother had left behind for nearly two years was rusted to the point I suspected it might have been dumped into hydrochloric acid. Consequently, I left the house thirty minutes earlier than planned and even then still arrived at school late. My first taste of high school was being late on the first day of the new semester. What a way start my high school life.

The school I was to attend was named Rakurowa High School, even though it was meant to be called "La Cloa High School". "La cloa" apparently meant "one who aims for the cross" in French. But even though the name was in French, I didn't think there was any need to force the name into Kanji¹².

Anyway, Rakurowa was a mission school. It wasn't a particularly large school. Even though it was supposed to be a college-prep school, no one seemed particularly impassioned about the test-preparation guidance it provided. And despite being called a mission school, we didn't have any religion classes. Then again, the place was just a normal high school. Although, if pressed, I'd say that the church had a hand in sponsoring the school. So, even though it was a private school, the tuition was cheap. Of course, as a result, there was the occasional cross sewn on various parts of the uniform. Well, if I was ever attacked by vampires after school, at least all those crosses would probably be put to good use, right?

My grades were just barely good enough to be acceptable, so preparing for the entrance exam of this school was an arduous task. If my middle school homeroom teacher ever saw my posted test results, she would have probably said, "Great job," as tears of surprise and relief would have flooded her eyes. In truth, I was probably that dangerously close to not making it into here.

12 In Kanji, "Rakurowa" is written as 洛芦和. On its own, it doesn't have any real meaning. It's just an approximately phonetic equivalent to "La Cloa". For those that are curious, breaking down the three Kanji, you get "roku" (of Kyoto), "ro" (a musical reed) and "wa" (harmony). Naming a school after a "harmonic reed from Kyoto"? Right...

But I have to say, before I even put in all that effort, I was thinking of turning Rakurowa down simply because this place was where my brother went to.

I had accepted, without a doubt in my mind, the fact that it was impossible for me to get into the same university as my brother. Knowing that, I was more than ready to just give up; but, seeing as how Inaka was a small town, the neighbors would have probably never shut up if I dropped out after high school.

I would have seriously become known as the retarded little brother and be treated like an idiot everywhere I went in Inaka if I did. Then one day, when I would be heading off to work, a stranger would probably approach me and say something along the lines of, "Don't lose your spirit and work hard!", while sustaining myself on those chocolates on display in pinball machines. A day like that would depress the hell out of even me.

"Umm...looks like someone has a self-persecution complex... Anyway, isn't this school great? The uniforms are cute and all." Misao said as we slipped through the stern-looking steel school gate.

This morning, Misao was wearing a brand new Rakurowa's school uniform. If someone had seen the two of us walking to school together, he'd probably assume we were a lovey-dovey high school couple. But of course, one of us was grouped under the "ghost" category, and so no one saw anything of the sort.

The ghost and I headed off to the school's opening ceremony. As expected, it was making me a little depressed. I knew that, in no time at all, I would be known as the kid who was possessed by ghosts. Upperclassmen would hear the rumors and underclassmen would find out because of their curiosity and I would be stuck with that label. I was used to it, but I guess – how should I say this – it sucked. And Misao didn't seem to mind if I told her that. I wish she would mind though, even if it was only a little.

Shaking those thoughts out of my head, I took a closer look at Misao's attire. Rakurowa High's girl's uniform design looked like a cross between the images of a colonial-era scholar and a vocalist in a church choir. Somehow, the retro and Goth look seemed to suit Misao just perfectly. Although, I must say I didn't think any colonial-era scholar ever had a skirt that short.

"Misao, what's with that uniform?" Like, where did you get it from? What were you planning to do with it? You're always finding the most popular cute clothes to wear; you might as well change your hair style to match. I wasn't curious enough to ask out loud, but it certainly was a little suspicious if I thought about it.

Misao, with a little proud smile, said, "It's a secret."

Well, whatever. You're a ghost, so it's fine. Despite my total indifference to these kinds of thoughts as recently as yesterday, I found myself strangely interested in all the minute details today.

Not only that. I suddenly recalled the events involving that strangely dressed girl who looked (sort of) like Misao.

The pseudo-miko had referred to Misao as a "projection body". Misao said she didn't know what she meant, but...

"Mornin' Tomo!" The tensely energetic voice of a girl invaded my ears and interrupted my thoughts. It was Ann. She had spotted me, and now purposefully ran out from the school building towards me.

"You're late, Tomo! You didn't see the class listings, right? You're in Class 7, with me." Ann said really suddenly. As we discussed our classes, it turned out that all of her elective classes were exactly the same as mine; some strings must have been pulled in the background there.

"You seem really down..." Ann gave me a disappointed look over my lack of reaction.

"I didn't get enough sleep, that's all. But at least you're energetic today."

"That's nothing out of the ordinary. But not getting enough sleep... Did something really come out, in that house of yours?" Ann asked with an extremely happy expression on her face, despite it being none of her business. But then, could it be that she was imagining - hoping - that I had been killed by that pseudo-miko girl?

After the incident, I basically didn't do anything about it. It was too ridiculously nonsensical that I hadn't even bothered telling the police about it. The only thing that suffered any real damage was one pane of window glass. Plus nothing had been stolen anyway.

"Anyway, I've got to go! My friends are waiting for me. I'll see you later in class!" Ann carried on her one-sided conversation and then once again ran back into the school.

"Isn't she cute, that Ann-chan," Misao remarked, smiling.

She certainly was cute, in the same way a small animal just works its way into one's heart was cute.

Since I still had a little time, I took a look at my surroundings. If there was one thing truly peculiar about Rakuruwa, it was the randomly vast amount of area dedicated to greenery and gardens. I found it difficult to understand any reason to need all that. There were already more than enough incessant distractions from the new incoming students and their relatives. If there truthfully was a class list posted somewhere in the building and someone wanted to check it, just how would they ever make it to the entrance way with all the distractions around?

With nothing else to do, I went inside and discreetly slipped out of my shoes¹³. As I put on my school slippers, someone suddenly snuck up behind me and put me in a chokehold.

"Tomo!" exclaimed the person. It was Higuchi.

Higuchi, who might actually be considered handsome if he'd just keep his mouth shut, laughed with a sneer, "Rejoice! We're in the same class again."

And of course this guy also chose the same elective classes as me. Well, if we picked an elective where the two of us could just screw around, all hell would break loose.

"Saeki and Takatsuki are there too. Oh, and that Ann as well."

"Eh? Who?" I asked, since I was at a loss. Well, I already knew about being in the same class as Ann though.

"Saeki Reiko¹⁴. We were in the same class during middle school. Last year at the Cultural Festival, she won with the sister complex... remember?"¹⁵

I already knew her. She was the girl Higuchi was completely unsuited for, but for whose affection he still continually pursued for the past three years.

"Not her. The other one."

"Oh, Takatsuki? She's the girl from Kitachuu¹⁶, you know. Takatsuki Kanade. She's pretty hot, too."

"How do you know someone from Kitachuu?" I asked as Higuchi curled up his lips in a cocky smirk.

"I've got my information connections."

13 In Anime, and possibly also Japan, students are required to change shoes before stepping into their classrooms. Every student is then given a shoe-locker, which is also then used as mailbox for everything from duel-challenge letters to confessions of love to 15 kilos of anthrax.

14 ED Note: In Japan and a few other Asian countries, surnames come first and since it's done the same way in the Anime, which we're also subbing, to stay consistent, surname will come first from now if it's supposed to (and if I'm editing). Of course, if a Western name pops up, the given name(s) will come first as it's supposed to.

15 The yearly Japanese high school cultural festivals celebrate things other than Anime. Surprising isn't it?

16 "Kitachuu" literally refers to "in the north". Unfortunately, given the ambiguity of the setting at this time, it's unsure where this is relative to or if it happens to just be the name of some place specifically. It might be that Tomo and the school are situated in the southern part of town and that she lives in the northern part, for example.



"Oh, the photography club..."

"Yeah."

I got it.

Outside of the occult, Higuchi had one other hobby: photography. He often boasted about becoming a professional photographer in the future. He actually had some talent and skill at photography, and would occasionally even enter various contests in photography magazines.

Uncharacteristically, however, the main subject of Higuchi's shots was usual city scenery; he did not take pictures of girls. Higuchi had apparently said no to such sort of thing. However, there were plenty of comrades in Higuchi's photography club whose very specialty was hiding in the bushes and sneaking shots of girls. Since they often borrowed and lent various camera parts to each other and Higuchi was, after all, mixing with people of that sort, he naturally got his hands on some questionable pictures also.

"Anyway, look at this. Taken for informational purposes, of course," Higuchi said as he produced a photograph from the inside of his uniform's pocket.

It was a photo of a high school girl going home after school. The background was probably a bus stop and the season was autumn. The girl in the photo was wearing Rakurowa High's uniform.

"Tomo! It's that person!" Misao cried in a high pitched voice as she glanced at the picture.

"Ah!"

The girl in the photo had the height of a model. She had shoulder-length, suavely-cut, silky black hair, which framed her sharp and orderly facial features. It was a face I recognized instantly: it was the pure-black-clad lady with the trunk from last night. She wasn't wearing her glasses in the photo, but there was no mistaking it.

"Someone as hot as her! Man! I just knew there were going to be people that knew about her if I asked around. Looking her up and investigating was justified, am I right?" Higuchi puffed his chest proudly.

And it was something to be proud of. This was certainly an amazing piece of information. I had thought that I would never have another chance of meeting her again.

"So she was someone from our school... I wonder if she's still around...?"
"Ah. She entered only last year, so she's just one grade above us. She should be a second-year right now."

"... A high school student, huh...?" Misao commented in surprise.

When we met her yesterday, she seemed far more mature. After seeing her wearing the school uniform in the photo, the fact that she now seemed like a normal high school student was ultimately mystifying.

"Her name is Kurosaki Shuri. She lives somewhere in Ayashima's direction. Other than that, however, I don't know much about her. Sorry man."

"No need to be sorry. Just getting this much information is already amazing, Higuchi," I honestly thanked him.

This was a huge piece of the puzzle. It would be far more beneficial to meet her directly and get information than waiting indefinitely for my brother to contact me. There were so many unknowns right now: the contents of that silver-colored trunk, her relationship with my brother, and finally Misao. I had a ton of questions I would want to ask her if she could really see Misao.

"When the entrance ceremony is over, let's go take a look at the second-years' classrooms. You could probably strike up a conversation with her without seeming unnatural. Besides, it's not like we're going to get many chances to get close to people that beautiful," Higuchi said with an overly

serious face.

"Eh? You're coming too, Higuchi?"

"Of course! Why the hell do you think I would go so far out of my way to get this photo?"

Oh, I see. So in the end, that's what you're after, huh? I thought, but decided to simply let it go. It doesn't change the fact that Higuchi was actually of use for once.

Higuchi, who still sported that serious expression, suddenly whispered, "Later, Tomo. And watch out, man."

"Eh?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

"'Watch out?' For what?"

"I don't know." Higuchi shook his head. Snatching the photo from my hands, he continued, "I was just warned the same way by the guy who gave me that photo. Watch out. Don't delve too deep into this."

Huh...?

What the hell was that?

Misao and I exchanged glances, but the two of us nodded silently in agreement with Higuchi.

The Kurosaki Shuri in the photo did not say anything and simply continued to stare at us with a graceful smile on her face.

I slept through nearly all of the glorious high school entrance ceremony. I realized there had been a tough-looking female teacher glaring fiercely at me from on stage, but what could I do? I was sleepy. I didn't have the balls or the daring nerve to just drop back into sleep immediately after surviving a monster attack, so I hadn't gotten a wink of sleep after the incident before dawn.

Either it was just as I suspected, and that Misao also didn't get enough sleep as well, or perhaps the principals boring speech just happened to be at the same time, but Misao simply vanished midway to go nap. She's a friggin' ghost and yet she still somehow manages to not get enough sleep - that's certainly at least a little weird... But I was still a little jealous of her.

When the principal and then the superintendent and then the members of the PTA and then the land owners and then finally some random old guy finally finished their formal greetings, my head was completely drowning in the hazy dredge of sleepiness. Somewhere in the middle, I think some person that called himself the student council president came on stage with three people, but I think I might have been dreaming by that point.

And, as expected of a mission school, midway through the opening ceremony, a hymn started to flow through the room. It reminded me strongly of when I attended some relatives wedding while I was still in elementary school. The upperclassmen in the choir singing the hymn were a group of fairly pretty girls. Kurosaki Shuri, however, was not amongst them.

Finally, the opening ceremony ended and all the students began to move toward their respective classrooms.

Meanwhile, Higuchi said, "Let's go the restroom!" and dragged me along¹⁷.

Raku High was an all-girls' school until about fifteen years ago and so the current ratio of girls to boys was about six to four - more girls than boys. But since it was an all-girls' school until recently,

17 TL Note: It's not as weird – or construed as "gay" – in Asian cultures for boys to go to the restroom with other boys. It is also not weird for Asian boys to pee next to each in restroom urinals even if there are plenty of other urinals open. However, you might still get weird looks if you walk into a toilet stall with a friend, occasionally shh each other, and whisper and giggle wildly. Try it with your Asian friend(s)!

there were extremely few men's restrooms. As a result, there were not enough for all the boys of this school, especially since the school had approximately the normal number of students for a school of its size.

And so, as if it was the premier day of some new video-game system, there was a huge line in front of one of the rare men's restrooms. I separated myself from the line and unhurriedly waited for Higuchi to return at the agreed upon location.

Misao had yet to return at this point.

I was so tired too...

As a result of napping earlier, my neck hurt as a result of dozing in an unnatural position and my joints were crunching and squeaking with agitation. I sucked in a huge breath, yawning.

Then...

"!?" I spat out the breath I had just taken. I couldn't even blink. Walking right before me was the very thing that had startled me so much.

It was a girl. It was a girl wearing Rakurowa's uniform.

From her uniform, I could tell she was a freshman, and she was walking, separated from the other students by a slight distance.

In her immediate vicinity, the entire aura of the place was different. She wasn't flamboyant and so she didn't stand out, but if one looked closely, she was easily very pretty. But that wasn't important right now.

What was important was that I knew her.

I couldn't forget her. She was the miko-cosplay girl that had tried to strangle me to death at Meioutei. That pseudo-miko.

I couldn't confirm the colors of her eyes from this distance, but there was no mistaking that petite face and long hair.

Moreover, there were the buxom curves of her breasts pressing up against her uniform. How could anyone mistake a killer like that for anything else?

"You!" My body reacted far faster than my mind could think. I snatched at and grabbed her arm as she walked past me.

"Uwa!" she yelped. She seemed like she was ready to raise her voice in a shriek.

Her wrists were thin.

But she didn't scream.

"Hya..." A small gasp, sounding almost kitten-like, escaped her lips as she swallowed her breath.

That's not to say she wasn't completely startled. As proof, her eyes widened enough that her eyeballs could have popped out¹⁸. In any case, the fact that I was here in this school must have been something far outside the realm of her expectations. I had her.

However, I hardened and froze as soon as I had pulled her close up to my face.

I might have grabbed her arm, but I did not think about what I would do after.

And now that it was "after," my heart was thumping furiously in my eardrums.

The memory of the freakish arm strength of the girl that tried to strangle me before dawn flooded back to my mind. If her martial arts instincts were active, then grabbing her arm out of the blue like this might turn out to be very bad for my health.

18 TL Note: Believe it or not, but that didn't sound nearly as gross in Japanese as it does in English

With a troubled expression on my face, I looked at her straight in the eyes.

"...Uh...um...please let go," she requested in a cute tone. She probably remembers my voice, I thought.

But her character and attitude seemed different from the pseudo-miko before.

"We're blocking the corridor for everyone...please let me go." She repeated in a meek voice. She was almost panicking - that much I understood. But whether it was because of our unexpected second meeting, or whether it was simply because she was suddenly accosted by some unknown male who latched onto her arm, I had absolutely no idea.

She glanced up at me with a frighten stare as she timidly curled up her shoulders as if to shrink away from me. Her expression was one of an innocent and pure high school girl being hit on and objectified by a bastard with a bad pick-up line.

I realized immediately after that, no matter how anyone looks at this, I was definitely the bad guy here.

"You, Natsume! What the heck are you doing?" some girl passing by asked angrily.

I looked at the source of the voice. It was Saeki Reiko, who had come from the same middle school as I had. That wasn't the best person to run into right now... I thought to myself. I was really bad at dealing with this girl. She was just always angry.

"Let go! Can't you see she clearly doesn't like it?" Saeki barked, glaring at me.

Crap, I thought to myself. The constantly angry Saeki was a defender of herself and girls in general; often, the spear point of her rants and rage was jabbed towards the opposite sex. And it's no coincidence that all of Higuchi's pick-up attempts toward Saeki have ended in failure; in fact, there were plenty of rumors circulating that she was actually lesbian.

"You don't understand, there was an incident..."

"Incident? What?"

"Um...I wanted to ask her..."

"And you're trying to pick her up with that? I thought you weren't like that, but in the end you're just the same sort as that Higuchi."

But you don't understand!

I decided I was getting nowhere dealing with Saeki; unknowingly, I curled my shoulders, shrinking myself, as I glanced helplessly at the other girl.

"Um...you weren't the person that came to my house this morning, right? I know that sounds really weird..."

She averted her eyes from my sudden glance and shook her head vigorously.

"See, you're wrong!" Saeki declared victoriously as her eyebrows rose, "And you're the one who is making up weird crap now."

You didn't have to go that far...

I was at a loss as to what I should do next and so I had no choice but to remain silent. Somewhere around me, a small laugh prickled into my ears.

"Um..." began the girl in a timid voice under the fiercely watchful eye of the mother-hen Saeki, "How... um... how come...err... you believe I was...uh... at your home..."¹⁹

19 TL Note: Yeah, I know those words don't sound timid at all, but, you know what, @#\$\$%ing shit-face uncultured philistine-of-a-language English doesn't exactly have words made to suit delicate situations like this.

ED Note: I tried, although I agree :P

"Umm... that's because..." I was quickly losing my confidence. Without a doubt, this girl was the pseudo-miko from this morning, but I had no way to prove this by myself. Why the hell wasn't Misao around at a time like this?

I was suddenly painfully aware of the fact that a large crowd of students had gathered in the corridor and were staring at us with eyes sparkling with interest. Shifting and shuffling voices carrying rumors filled the air.

Saeki glared at me with her hands on her hips and scorn in her eyes, "You happy now? Takatsuki-san, just ignore douche-bags like this guy and let's go." Saeki said as she spun the girl around and the two of them headed off toward their classrooms.

I had no way to stop them and so could do nothing but watch them leave.

As she passed me, the girl said pitifully, "Um...I really didn't mind..." Her voice was fearful and nervous as she entered her classroom. Curious, I looked up at the sign to see which class she was in.

First-year Class 7. Same as me.

No way... I thought to myself

Was that pseudo-miko devil from before dawn seriously my high school classmate? And what was with that completely different behavior? It was as if she had some sort of alternate personality...?

I had absolutely no idea just what the hell was going on.

"Yo, Tomo!" greeted Higuchi, who had finally came out of the restroom, while I was loitering with a dark expression. "What did you just talk to Takatsuki about?"

His expression clearly demanded a clear answer and gave me no room to escape.

I returned a look of suspicion at Higuchi, "...Takatsuki?"

"Yeah. You were just talking to her. From Kitachuu. Takatsuki Kanade. I actually thought you were being incredibly daring, but it wasn't because you knew what you were doing?"

"Takatsuki Kanade..." I shook my head. The more I thought about it, the more I thought I had heard that name somewhere before. "By any chance, is her house a Shinto shrine²⁰?"

"Shinto shrine?" Higuchi returned a deeply mystified face. "No...I haven't heard of anything like that about her. What made you think that? Were you told to go get an exorcism?"

Yeah, regrettably. I didn't know if she'd perform an exorcism for me or not, but, in any case, at least she seemed to be able to see ghosts.

However, if she wasn't the daughter of some family from a Shinto-shrine, then why was she dressed as a miko?

So was she even a real miko?

Moreover, why was she pretending to have never met me? Or was it that, in the end, I was just confusing her for someone else.

Brooding over these doubts and questions, I walked into the classroom.

Seat assignments were apparently organized through a gender-unbiased numbering system; I, whose last name was Natsume, was appointed to a seat dead center in the classroom.

And before the "Na" in Natsume was "Ta"²¹. "Ta" as in Takatsuki Kanade.

²⁰ In Japanese communities, Shinto shrines are run and kept by various families who may have inherited it from their ancestors. Generally, if these families happened to have daughters or extremely feminine sons, these children are forced into becoming shrine priestesses where they apparently spend their entire time sweeping the shrine grounds, or in rare cases, learning how to use katanas.

²¹ The Japanese Hiragana (and Katakana) alphabet is arranged into something of a 11 by 5 matrix with the first row being a, i, u, e, and o, the second row being ka, ki, ku, ke, and ko and so on. In this system, ta (and thus da) are one

You've got to be kidding me...

Saeki, who sat a few seats away, threw me an displeased glare.

While everyone else in class moved about and chatted, Takatsuki Kanade sat quietly in her seat and waited for the homeroom teacher. Uncomfortably, I desperately slid down in my seat in an attempt to hide behind the short girl who sat in front of me.

Takatsuki Kanade didn't turn around.

"Hun...so something like that happened."

Misao came back midway through homeroom during the self-introduction phase. I related everything that happened to her and Misao then went to check out Takatsuki's face before returning. Personally, I was convinced she was, without a doubt, the pseudo-miko from before dawn, but when I pressed Misao, she responded with:

"Yeah, I dunno. She certainly looks like her, but if they're the same person or not...well, she doesn't seem to be able to see me."

Or maybe she was pretending to not see even though she could.

Misao only saw the pseudo-miko for a split second, though, and it couldn't be helped if she didn't clearly remember her face.

"Should I go surprise her?"

Surprise her...that probably involved Misao suddenly popping out right in front of Takatsuki.

"Don't. Let's not cause chaos in the classroom," I said, shaking my head lightly.

I'd rather not cause her undue trouble and then seize the chance and expose her. She was my classmate, after all. Most importantly, there was the likely possibility that she could beat me to a pulp for it later. And I didn't want to get caught up in more trouble in the first few hours of the new semester than I had already gotten myself into. And if it weren't for that, there was still the fact that Saeki was still glaring at me furiously.

"Un...I guess so." Misao mused.

It was nearly my turn to introduce myself.

As Takatsuki stood up, I saw, before my eyes, the petite and beautifully shaped form of her butt. She wasn't even that tall, yet the position of her hips was unbelievably perfect²². I was a little jealous.

"I'm from Kitachuu, my name is Takatsuki."

With that one sentence, she had captured everyone's attention. Of course, the boys in the class looked at her with fiery passion. If nothing else, Takatsuki was a beauty; thus I was sure there were plenty of people targeting her with lustful gazes.

Seeing her like this, I couldn't help thinking she was but an ordinary high school girl.

There was just something about her soft and feminine appearance and her timid, almost helpless, demeanor coupled with that heart-melting aura that seem to attract people; it was easy to see why folks like Saeki would be so interested in someone like her.

But, in terms of her entirety, there was seriously something a little more sinister about her. If this was all an act, it certainly was quite impressive.

row above na. Actually, I don't know why I felt the need to explain this; if you're enough of a Japan-o-phile to read some douche-bag's translation of a Japanese novel, you probably already know something about their alphabet.

22 TL Note: Yeah, I don't know what that's supposed to mean either.

ED Note: Maybe it's one of those ideal features that Japanese men feel women should have. Maybe it's related to child-bearing. Or maybe Tomo is just effeminate, since he's jealous about it too.



However, this certainly did make asking Takatsuki about the incident before dawn difficult. Granted our seats were close together, but to actually talk to her, I'd first have to get her to turn around. But if I say or do something stupid, then that Saeki will fly over here and forcibly repeat exactly what had already happened earlier.

My head began to hurt from over-thinking about this.

Giving up, I looked up from my desk and came close to nearly screaming.

Misao had suddenly appeared right before Takatsuki as she continued her self-introduction.

Even though I told her not to...

Misao, within inches of Takatsuki, stared at her while waving her hands, laughing wildly, and then even clapping her hands together, pretending to be a cat.

Takatsuki stood there without a word. Perhaps her silence came as a result of surprise by Misao, or perhaps she was simply considering what to say next about herself. Either way, I had no way of knowing. The sight of two beautiful girls standing extremely close to each other, their faces - their lips - almost touching, made me sit at the edge of my seat with my palms sweaty and my heart racing. And then...

"I don't have any particular hobbies. I just don't like kagaku." Takatsuki said abruptly before returning to her seat.

Kagaku... as in science? No, wait. Kagaku, as in chemistry - like when oxygen and hydrogen react to form water²³. It was a pretty random statement, but I suppose announcing that one was bad at a certain subject doesn't break any rule about self-introductions.

Takatsuki had returned to her seat and Misao, alone, remained.

Misao shrugged, but was otherwise silent. In the end, she couldn't get any reaction from Takatsuki; maybe Takatsuki really couldn't see her after all.

"Next, please, Natsume-kun," called out Hashiratani, the effeminate male homeroom teacher²⁴.

"Aaa..." I hurriedly stood up.

Distracted by Misao's antics, I had completely forgotten I was next, right after Takatsuki. I had given no thought to what I was going to say about myself.

And in the end, my panicky and mumbling appearance utterly invited in the mocking laughter of the rest of the class; and in the process of giving what was possibly the barest of acceptable self-introductions, I still managed to stumble over my words three times.

"What's wrong? Were you just too fascinated by Takatsuki-san's backside?" The homeroom teacher, stifling a smile, teased.

You might just be joking, mister, but I'm not laughing.

The reaction of the class, however, was more varied: some laughed light-heartedly, some broiled in jealousy, and some watched me silently, as if biding their time before coming to beat me down with their buddies.

Misao made an apologetic gesture with her hands, as if saying "sorry".

23 TL Note: Yes, as you suspected, "kagaku" is characterized exclusively by hydrogen combustion and OChem (Organic Chemistry) and PChem (Physical Chemistry) in college is just some sadistic invention created to water-board and bullet-sex unwitting college students like me. Anyway, "kagaku" can mean either science or chemistry depending upon the kanji used (i.e. they are homonyms). Why is Japanese structured to allow for such obvious confusion

24 TL Note: "yasa-otoko-ppoi" is the actual phrase used to describe the teacher. Some descriptions just don't get translated into English without becoming demeaning - even "effeminate" as used can be considered mildly demeaning. Well, there's nothing I can do with western society and its stigmas against women.

And even after all that, Takatsuki still didn't turn around.

When homeroom was over, we were told we could go home. In this world, there were schools where students turned into to busy-bodies immediately after the opening ceremony; Raku High was one of these.

Since the second-years were having class as usual, we simply waited around during lunch break for the opportunity to go investigate the second-year classrooms. And most importantly, we waited to meet Kurosaki Shuri.

"Tomo, aren't you a little tired?" Higuchi asked as we went up the stairs.

"Yeah, a little," I responded. And the reason for my complete lack of energy: Takatsuki.

During that entire pointless interim known as homeroom, Takatsuki didn't turn around once; she simply sat straightly and attentively. Thus, after all my desperate attempts to get her to notice me failed, I was left with nothing but a sense of exhaustion.

Of course, I couldn't just call out for her; she was, after all, scared of me. Maybe it had something to do with the incident before dawn, or perhaps it was caused simply by what had happened in the corridors earlier, I had no idea.

However, assuming that Takatsuki and the pseudo-miko were the same person, then I would probably be the one that gets killed; so there should be no reason for her to be frightened.

Conversely, I was afraid that, in reality, there was an inner demon within Takatsuki that simply hadn't surfaced to rampage about yet. Something about her suggested that her inner self was split between Takatsuki Kanade and an untamed beast that would randomly be unleashed and storm. And for now, it was as if this beast was merely watching, biding its time.

All of this thinking made me exhausted.

And that Takatsuki wasn't even here right now.

She had dashed out of the classroom for home the moment we were dismissed, almost as if she dreaded lingering and possibly talking to me. Immediately before she raced out, she turned for a fleeting moment and our eyes met, but that might have just been my imagination.

Higuchi gave my back a few light shoves with his palm: I had just stopped in the middle of the stairs. Why the hell was this guy so happy?

"Don't worry about being hated by Takatsuki. I know how you feel, but she's just not your type. There has to be balance in the universe."

I really didn't want to hear that from Higuchi, of all people. Besides, it's not like she actually confirmed that she really hated me.

"I'm...not too good at dealing with that girl." Misao said in agreement with a jut of her chin.

How come? I asked with my eyes.

"Well, isn't she full of misunderstandings? I guess you could say she's too self-conscious, getting flustered over what other people think. Just who does she think she is? She might be a bit cute and her chest might be just a little bigger than mine, but..."

It was pretty unusual for Misao to say things like this in front of me. Certainly, her personality has been a bit tough since, well, forever, but, unless it was something really conspicuous, she normally wouldn't bad-mouth other girls. I wonder why she was doing it now. I guess maybe she was a little jealous because her boobs were rather petite in comparison.

"It's not like that!!" Misao cried and, as if in a show of protest, vanished away²⁵.

²⁵ TL Note: As you may or may not know, Japanese sentence can end with various emotion-carrying particles used to express anything from question, to need for affirmation, to female assertiveness. In Misao's case, she used "wa" and

Well, that's fine too. In any case, seeing as how Kurosaki Shuri could probably also see Misao, having Misao there would just cause undue trouble.

Then it hit me.

What if it wasn't me who Takatsuki was scared of, but Misao...?

If Takatsuki could really see spirits, then it's not strange at all that she would want to avoid me, who was being possessed by Misao.

As for her actions, she might be able to see ghosts, but it's probably hard for her to say anything without being construed as insane or judged. So in the end, it was not that she wouldn't explain herself to me. Rather, it was because she couldn't.

I was starting to get it a little. Unsurprisingly, the two beautiful girls fighting in class was starting to make me hate school already. Or so I say, but I still didn't know what Takatsuki's relation with the pseudo-miko from before dawn was. But in any case, it'll be necessary for me to eventually speak to Takatsuki again.

It was just irritating that I couldn't come up with a way to do it.

"Hey, isn't that Natsume?" Someone called as we walked through the busy lunch-time corridor on the second years' floor. A rotund male student, whom god had apparently granted plenty of excess in waist, walked toward us.

"Aah...senpai²⁶."

I was slightly relieved - it was someone whose face I recognized. I don't know about Higuchi, but I was something of an introvert and a freshman on top of that; I was naturally nervous walking down the halls of upperclassmen I didn't know.

"Who's that?" Higuchi asked in a quiet voice.

I replied that he was my senior from the Track Club at my middle school

"Track?!" Higuchi asked with doubt and suspicion plastered on his face.

It was, of course, understandable that one would exclaim disbelief upon looking at such a rotund body form and imagining it doing track. But this person was a hammer thrower²⁷.

The fat senpai nodded in confirmation. "What's up, Natsume? You have business in the second-years' classrooms? Oh right, the Track Club is having a meeting right after. You wanna come with me and check it out? You haven't set your eyes on another club already, have you?"

"Aah...that's fine, I guess, but senpai, before that, I have something I want to ask you."

"What's up?"

"Second-year Kurosaki Shuri, you wouldn't happen to know what class she's in, would you?"

The expression on senpai's face instantly bled away at those words - it was something I probably wouldn't forget for life.

"yo", the former a particle for female assertiveness and the latter for noting new information - akin to "you know" in English

26 TL Note: "senpai" (pronounced more like "sempai" and sometimes spelled that way) means one's senior at some social institution - it is a status that is relegated more prestige and honor over one's junior or kouhai. Of course, because classless Western society believes so much in equality (please imagine me rolling my eyes), we don't have things like this in our language.

27 Yes, hammer throwing is an actual throwing event (much to the surprise of the TL), and an Olympic event to boot (cue the shock). In terms of throwing events, discus, shot-put, and javelin, are more well-known. If compared to those three, hammer throwing is closest to shot-put, except that instead of just a ball, it's a ball attached to a long handle, to simulate a sledgehammer (which is essentially the origin of its name). It's probably less well-known, though, because it's a heck of a lot more dangerous (Imagine Vita's - from Nanoha - Raketen/Missile Hammer attack while actually letting go of Eisen).

The jolly look on his face had instantly frozen over and his face turned to a shade of red for a split second before shifting blue. His lips, normally a healthy reddish pink, were now ashen and shook as he spoke. He was, without a doubt, scared to hell.

"Se-senpai?" I stared at his face in surprise.

Senpai stepped back two or three steps in fear, "Natsume, you... you know Kurosaki?" He asked in a quaking voice. He was increasingly beginning to look like a sumo wrestler.

"Well, pretty much," I confirmed, although technically, she's my brother's acquaintance.

But that caused senpai to half-gasp and half-scream in surprise before spinning on his heels and dashing off.

"Se-senpai?"

"I don't know!"

What?

"I don't know anything. Later! Sorry, but I'm rushing on ahead."

"Eh...um...what about the Track Club's meeting?"

Senpai stopped for but a second and spun around, looking at me pitifully. His eyes seemed to say "you're really a great guy, but..."

But other than that, he didn't actually speak a word and instead simply returned to his classroom.

"What the hell was that?" Higuchi asked tiredly as he crossed his fingers behind his head.

I shook my head but said nothing.

Soon after, we discovered where Kurosaki Shuri was.

Some girl whom Higuchi had approached sincerely informed us, "Kurosaki-san? She's in Second-year Class 4, but she's probably in the chemistry preparation room right now."

Why was she in the chemistry preparation room during lunch? She was apparently a member of the Science Club at school. Not the Chemistry Club, but the Science Club²⁸. Just judging by appearances, the club probably has had a lengthy history, but that still didn't explain just why the hammer-throwing senpai was scared shitless of her. But fortunately, not everyone was so terrified by Kurosaki Shuri and I suppose that was a bit of a relief for me. I already had my fill of weirdos with Takatsuki Kanade.

And so we headed off to the chemistry preparation room.

Compared to the architecture of our old middle school, Raku High's buildings were all generally smaller, but more numerous. The chemistry preparation room was buried deep within the physical sciences' halls and, in any case, the whole place gave off a very strong research institution vibe. It was, however, a near-ancient building, and though it seemed usable for research, it had none of the high-tech aura typically attributed to research. If anything, instead, there was a somewhat suspicious vibe hanging in the atmosphere of the place.

The science hallway was long and narrow and adjacent to the chemistry classrooms. After traversing down the hallway for several minutes, we finally arrived at the classroom that led to the chemistry preparation room.

Inside the classroom, various medicinal products and teaching material were perched on wooden shelves against the walls, and a large lecture table sat squarely in the middle of the room. If it was just that, it would've just seemed like any other regular classroom; but it was a most strange and

²⁸ TL note: I hope you haven't forgotten that the Japanese word for "Science" and "Chemistry" are pronounced the same way.

confounding objet d'art²⁹ situated in the room which had caught our eye.

"Wow.. .crazy..." Higuchi, the occult manic, breathed with an impressed smile on his face.

It wasn't unreasonable for Higuchi to seem so pleased. No matter how one looked at the objet d'art, there was just no mistaking it for anything other than an altar some heretic band of fanatics would use to worship Satan. Black velvet cloth was spread over what appeared to be a tiered rack, and dozens of exotic instruments whose purpose I couldn't discern were stacked on top.

"What's that?"

Misao, who had apparently returned, asked me over my shoulder.

I shook my head but didn't say anything.

The thing looked like it could've been anything from an elementary school student's invention to some mock-up ancient artifact souvenir one would find at the department store. It could have also been some prehistoric cogwheel or some unbalanced and poor-taste piece of artwork. I figured it was probably some sort of machine, but I had absolutely no idea what it was suppose to do. It certainly did just look like a mountain of crap, but what if it was some laboratory equipment for the Science Club?

"...Oh?"

We had eventually stopped before the preparation room and the double doors that lead inside had opened unexpected. A man wearing a tattered lab coat appeared before us, holding a cup of ramen in his hands.

He was probably somewhere in his twenties. He was a rather tall man with his eyes hidden behind his long bangs. He must have been the faculty adviser for the Science Club or something.

"...New faces, huh? Freshmen?" The man put his cup of ramen down on the table and beckoned us to enter. Then, without a word, he pointed toward two empty pipe chairs, seemingly telling us to sit.

Higuchi and I exchanged glances and then stepped into the preparation room together. Misao, meanwhile, looked all around the strange and foreign classroom with deep interest.

"I'm first-year Higuchi. This is Natsume."

"I'm Ichihara. Pleased to meet you." The man said, twisting his lips. After a moment, he scrunched his eyebrows dubiously and studied me, "...Natsume?"

"Yes. That's me..." Um...what?

The man split his chopsticks as he asked with an interested expression, "Perhaps you're Natsume Naotaka's little brother?"

I jumped in surprise.

"You know my brother?"

"More or less. He was a graduate from Raku-High, after all. He was my student too. Not very cute, but he was definitely an able bastard." Ichihara said, and then turned his attention completely towards gorging on his ramen. While eating, he returned his gaze at me and asked, as he was chewing his food, "Are you here to join the Science Club too?"

He dropped the question so suddenly that all I could do was give him a blank look.

"You also have...eh? What's wrong? What, they haven't told you anything? Naotaka founded the Science Club. Well, technically I think he revived it."

"My brother did?"

It was the first time I had heard of it. Now that I think about it, I knew absolutely nothing about

²⁹ French. It literally translates to "object of art"; or in other words, something akin to a work of art.

what my brother did during high school.

"Umm...then, what Kurosaki-san knew about my brother was..."

"What, you're already acquainted with Kurosaki too?" Ichihara asked, without any noticeable appearance of surprise.

The conversation was finally going somewhere. Natsume Naotaka created the Science Club and Kurosaki Shuri was a member of the Science Club, too. Their ages were too far apart for the two of them to have been enrolled at Raku-High at the same time, but it wouldn't have been strange if they had met through their seniors and juniors at school. But that, by no means, meant all the mysteries had been solved, either.

"If that's the case, then it'll help out a great deal if the two of you would join the club too. In any case, that's the only thing on Kurosaki's mind; it'll be fine even if you two just watch. Yeah, when she decides to stay late into the evening by herself, I get these concerned stares from outsiders."

"Huh? Kurosaki-san is the only member of the Science Club?" Higuchi asked abruptly.

What a transparent guy, I thought to myself tiredly. Club activities with just the two of them after school... left alone in a classroom. On top of that, it would be a suspicious occult-freak with a strange piece of objet d'art. It'd certainly be an attractive circumstance for Higuchi.

"There's one more, but that person is in the hospital right now." Ichihara said, sweating beads. It was obviously not a subject he wanted to touch on.

"If you two want to join, write your names down and I'll give it to Kurosaki. She's the stand-in president right now."

Ichihara pulled out a few sheets of the club manifesto and sign-up forms from the work desk and handed them to us. He had, in red, scrawled his name in as the faculty adviser. I had a feeling we weren't going to be getting much oversight from this guy as we signed our names.

"Thank you." He extended out both hands for Higuchi and me to shake.

"Are we seriously joining the Science Club?" I muttered to Higuchi in askance.

It's not like I was perfectly fine with this arrangement. But leaving some guy like Higuchi alone with a beauty like Kurosaki was much cause of worry.

"What? It's not like there are any problems."

"That would be fine if that was the case. But what if more and more new members join the club after this?"

"We'll think about it when that time comes," Higuchi replied, clearly and obviously not thinking.

Just then, a shuffling sound crackled behind us and the aluminum doors opened.

I turned around to see a female student walk into the chemistry preparation room.

"She's here," Misao whispered.

I nodded.

She might have been wearing her school uniform this time, but I immediately recognized her: the jet-black-clad lady who had come to the Meioutei last night - Kurosaki Shuri.

She looked twenty last night, but now, in her school uniform, she had the appearance of a normal high school girl.

She wasn't wearing the glasses from yesterday either.

"My, my."

I realized Shuri was smiling at me in approval.

"You've already made your way to the Science Club! Amazing. I expected nothing less from Naotaka's little brother."

"Haa..."

If you're going to bring up my brother's name, then it really doesn't feel like you're complimenting me. However, from her words I understood something.

Shuri was expecting me to come visit her on my own. Knowing that, she purposely had said nothing about the contents of that trunk or mentioned any information on her location or identity. She was testing me, testing to see if I could make it to her without any clues or help.

"Yes, yes. It was me! I was the one who looked up your name and investigated the Science Club!" interrupted Higuchi, who had been entirely ignored, while waving his arms wildly.

But Shuri's focus was only on me as if I was some sort of exotic animal.

"You are?"

"Higuchi. First-year, Class 7. Higuchi Takuma."

"Okay," Shuri whispered absent-mindedly.

I was willing to put money on the fact Higuchi's name did not even register in Shuri's memory. Shuri then smiled sweetly at the frozen-stiff Higuchi and took the club sign-up sheets from Higuchi. She put the sheets in order and pushed me in.

"I welcome you to the Science Club, Tomoharu," a pure angelic smile bloomed across Shuri face as she spoke.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but that smile somehow seemed to insinuate that my body and being would soon be in mortal danger.

Higuchi stood with his chin down in disappointment and Ichihara continued eating his cup ramen with a bitter smile on his face.

Misao remained silent. Shuri, too, was pretending she couldn't see Misao. Or perhaps she really couldn't see her right now.

"Um...please wait a minute... I'm not really here to join the Science Club..."

"You don't want to know about your brother?" Shuri interrupted me coldly.

What?

"The trunk I gave to you yesterday. Your cute girlfriend who haunts you. If you join the Science Club and become my minion, I'll explain all these things to you in careful detail."

"Careful detail..." Higuchi mumbled but said nothing more.

I felt resigned and speechless.

What are you saying, woman? 'If you join, I'll explain everything to you'? In other words, if I don't join, then you won't tell me, huh!

"She's threatening you, huh," Misao said seemingly with a sigh.

Threatening? Hell yeah. Certainly now, right after the opening ceremony, was the season when each and every club begins to welcome in new members, but I've never heard of a method like this to pull in new people.

Ignoring our startled looks, Shuri continued into the depth of the preparation room briskly.

She then removed from a locker a long black mantle.

Shuri swung the Halloween costume-like cape over her uniform. Honestly, it wasn't that the style didn't suit her, but just what the hell was she thinking? Must she dress like a witch during lunch

time in high school? Does she actually want us to laugh about this? But the mantle gracefully hugged her silhouette and it felt almost normal to see her dressed like so.

"Um...what's with that?" Higuchi asked without even a pretense of tact.

You go, Higuchi. That's a good question.

"You guys know what the Science Club does for activities, right?" Shuri asked, with a teasing taunting sexy smile on her face.

Answering a question with another question was bad manners, and even social rules as ignorable and minor as that managed to pack a punch.

We shook our heads in unison.

Oh, actually, exactly what do we do in the Science Club? Are we observing the sky? Testing water quality? Chemistry experiments? Actually, I figured we'd probably lump all of those things together and more.

Shuri, however, shook her head as if to say we were completely wrong.

"Well, since time immemorial, science was construed to be the same as magic. Astronomy developed inexplicably with astrology, and if alchemy never existed, then chemistry would never have been born. Even math was thought to be as deeply tied to the black arts as the kabbalah was to numerology³⁰."

Despite my startled state, Shuri's sudden words burst into my ears.

In other words, our club activities for the Science Club consisted of researching the history of science? Then I suppose that would somewhat explain that seemingly pointless piece of objet d'art left outside.

"We don't really care about magic."

We really didn't care.

"While modern science and magic are obviously different things, in truth, what we label as mere technology now was because of the miraculous imagination of the people of the past. But today's science is setting its sights high and advancing towards a major groundbreaking theory. And scientifically, we're quickly approaching an era where there is only one type of truth. Don't you think that's a bit strange?"

No, not really. I had no idea what this major groundbreaking theory was, and, if possible, I'd rather you not throw all these troublesome "truths" and axioms at me³¹. Even if I was interested, I didn't want to know, if for nothing else than because my grades were barely good enough and if I have to memorize more stuff I'd be in a world of trouble. But, Shuri didn't seem to be the type to care about such things...

"The mother of science and magic, in reality, is split into two opposed factions."

"Ah..."

30 She says suuhijutsu or 数秘術 (literally, "secret/occult art of numbers") which isn't a word commonly found in any Japanese dictionary, but after a little bit of research however, it seems that suuhijutsu probably refers to numerology, also known as numerical divination. Numerology is similar to astrology, except that its basis lies entirely on numbers and not the celestial bodies. According to numerology, everything about you, from your name and gender to your date of birth, has a certain number associated with it (which is derived with some formula). In general numerology, you gather all the numbers you need, crunch some more numbers, and out comes some sort of result or divination, which yields such things as "the world ends in 2012", "the Anti-Christ is Obama", or "you had tuna for lunch".

31 TL note: For those not explicitly clear on the difference between an axiom (or postulate) and a theory, an axiom is something we take to be true without proof whereas a theory is something proven logically to be true. For instance, the claim that the real numbers are complete is an axiom whereas closed and bounded sections of Euclidean space is compact is a theorem (or theory)

I could see where this was going.

The whole thing with the basis of magic was one of the most common things known universally.

Two opposing forces. Yin and Yang. Existence and nonexistence. 0 and 1. Man and woman. Light and dark. White and black.

“White magic and black magic?” Higuchi whispered with his eyes half-open.

It might’ve been a reply out of almost natural instinct for the occult freak, but Shuri nodded at him with approval.

“That’s right. And since magic gave birth to science, science too was fated to be split into white science and black science.”

My head was starting to hurt from this. I suddenly looked around to find some reprieve. My eyes eventually landed on Ichihara, who was making a troubled face and sitting with his arms crossed. Don’t just sit there staring and do something about this club-president-substitute to keep her from spouting off more nonsensical stupid bullshit, I thought. After all, aren’t you the faculty advisor?

However, I finally understood just why Kurosaki Shuri wore a mantle.

To oppose the whole white lab-coat of the scientist, Shuri wears a black one.

And then Shuri’s words forcefully cut into my thoughts.

“...Essentially, the goal of the activities of the Science Club is to further research in the black sciences. You guys get it, right?”

Even if tell her that I do... the whole concept was still disturbing.

Misao, no longer able to hold it in, giggled to herself. I pursed my lips, unable to laugh.

Our end goal was black science research.

What the hell was that?

Don’t tell me she reports it the same way to the student council as well.

Well, it was something I was expecting. There, I said it. To the ghost-possessed me, this sort of stuff would be considered to be within the realm of every day norm. I guess I should laugh at that, I thought; but Shuri, who looked at me with a small smile, was absolutely serious. Nothing about her atmosphere suggested it was a joke.

Ichihara pretended to be asleep and completely devoid of any responsibility.

Higuchi was thinking this over with an incredibly serious expression on his face. In any case, Shuri’s words managed to leave a deep impression on him and he seemed to be troubling over just where to draw the line between his much loved occult and this thing Shuri called black science. Everyone was being just so damned stupid.

And I was forced to come to grips with the fact that the greatest moron, the founding boss responsible for creating this moronic club, was none other than my own brother.

Before I realized it, there was only ten more minutes left of lunch break and Shuri announced she needed to return to her classroom.

However, she didn’t look like she was in the mood to take off the black mantle first. Wearing that mantle during club meetings was apparently something of her policy. If I join the club, maybe she’ll force me to wear one too. That would be pretty bad.

“Of course, you will join the club for me, right Tomoharu?” Shuri asked in an almost flirty voice.

I had no idea on the “of course” part. If I gave this normal consideration, I would have refused this suspicious-as-hell club even if someone piled money in front of me.

However, Shuri had a trump card – she had information.

It would be a lie if I said I didn't care about just exactly what my brother was doing in this Science-but-not-really-Science Club. And if I asked him directly, it's not likely he'd tell me. Basically, if I let this chance slip by, I would forever lose my only hope of attaining this information. Of course, I was also interested in exactly what was inside that silver-colored trunk.

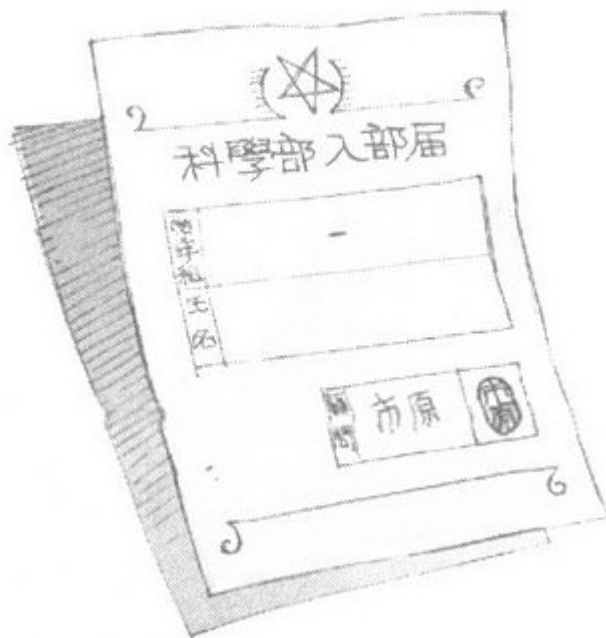
And, more than anything else, I wanted to know about Misao.

Why could Shuri see Misao? If I can figure that out, then maybe I'll know the truth behind her very existence itself.

It was a dangerous adventure, but should I join anyway? Or maybe I should refuse, after all.

Was there something else I can tell her that would work?

Unable to come to a good decision, my shoulders drooped in helplessness and I weakly whispered, "Let me think about it for a little while."



Chapter 3

For some reason, I was unusually tired by the time I finally returned home with Misao. Soon after, while I was sluggishly preparing dinner, the telephone rang. Upon picking it up, I was greeted by a voice belonging to an unnecessarily high-strung woman...

"What's up, son? How are you doing? How does it feel to finally experience living by yourself as a high school student? Oh, and just because you're feeling lonely, you still shouldn't go and use your brother's ID to rent adult videos... Actually, you probably don't have the balls for that anyway, hahaha."

Man, just where do you plan to draw the line on things you shouldn't say? I thought to myself as I listened to her ramble on.

"...Your mom?" Misao asked me with a wry smile.

I nodded my head in annoyance. Just hearing her brainlessly upbeat voice was enough to double the crappiness of my life. Mom was employed as a nurse and she apparently talked that way even at work; I always thought it was something of a wonder that no patient ever complained about it.

Glancing out the windows, I could still see pale light emanating from outside. She should still be on duty at this time, so what was she doing skipping out on work?

"What do you need?" I asked her in a deep voice.

She was the sort of parent that would never have the praiseworthy spirit to call out of worry over her son starting to live on his own. Moreover, the fact she would go out of her way and skip work to give me a call could only mean that she must have some urgent and pressing need.

However, instead of the expected request, her response was, "Hehehe... what do you think?"

"...I'm going to hang up."

"Wah! Hey, not so fast! What is with you?! You can't take even one little joke? Just where did I go wrong raising you? Just where, huh?"

I decided to ignore that.

I barely had any memory of this woman "raising" me in any appropriate sense of the word – the product of always being busy at work and never being at home. Coupled with the fact that my brother didn't feel the need to be part of my life growing up, it was a little bizarre that I somehow managed to survive until today on my own... Then again, maybe I was able to because Misao had always been there for me, I thought to myself as I felt a sudden wave of a sense of emptiness. It was a terribly unhappy feeling knowing that the closest thing I had to someone family-like, by far, was a ghost.

"Yeah, I guess it had to be that – the plane accident. Or maybe it's because you fell down some stairs while in kindergarten. That really surprised me! If I had only shot some video of that, I'd totally keep it in my video treasure box collection – you were so slow and dull straight up from the beginning!"

"..."

With that, I shoved Mom and her fancily made-up string of theories aside in my mind. Falling down stairs was one thing, but I seriously didn't believe that plane accident could've had any impact on my personality!

Anyway, I had more important things to concentrate on: I had to start stir-frying my dinner. If there was one thing I knew about stir-frying, it was that if you want to make stir-fried bean sprouts well, you need to do it all in one fell swoop with a strong fire underneath. I was nearly done stir-frying too, as I could smell the aroma of the spices begin to waft up through the steam. But then, I heard Mom continue...

"...Yeah, yeah... Oh! I nearly forgot. Nao-kun called earlier."

"Eh?!" I let out, as I nearly dropped my frying pan in surprise at Mom's sudden revelation.

My brother called? That was unusual...

Misao, who was floating with her ears almost glued onto the phone receiver, widened her eyes in surprise. She then boxed her fingers into a square shape as if to say, "It probably was about the

trunk.”

“What did my brother say?” I asked firmly.

“Huhn! You want me to tell you?” Mom replied in a teasing voice.

I grinded my teeth in irritation, “Hurry up and tell me! And anyway, where is he right now?”

“No idea. I forgot to ask,ahaha. Well, he sounded healthy though, so he’s probably fine.”

It’s not fine at all! I thought savagely. There was an entire mountain of questions I wanted to ask him, and yet you...

“Tomoharu, you also seem to be doing fine, as well. I figured you would be a lot more stressed out by yourself. Oh, and don’t worry, I’m having lots of fun with Kasuha-chan. Yesterday, we took a bath together. Girls nowadays are so incredibly stylish, you know! I mean, she has long legs and her chest is strangely somehow not flat... you’re getting dirty thoughts now, aren’t you? Dirty boy...”

“No I’m not!”

“Not in the mood, huh...? Well, Kazuha-chan has been asking me a lot about you, you know! Like about things at school, or when you were younger, or what your favorite foods are, or what type of girl you like. She’s incredibly bothered by the thought that it was her fault you walked out of the house.”

“Heh... Why?” I voiced that suspicion over the phone. I had been certain she hated me.

From the other end of the phone, Mom sighed deeply.

“You’re a little dense, aren’t you? That’s why you’re not very popular with girls, you know. You just have no idea what’s in a girl’s heart, do you, you cherry boy?³²”

That’s none of your business!

“Well, whatever,” she continued without waiting for my response. “In any case, make sure you properly show your face at Sonomiya’s house next week.”

“Not so fast, just what are you trying to pull? What about the thing with my brother?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” Mom said, cackling.

I was really starting to not give a rat’s ass. I wanted to just hang up the phone as soon as possible. Maybe the fact that my brother left the country and wasn’t coming back was also because of having this kind of mother.

“Um... let’s see... Nao-kun said he doesn’t mind you doing whatever you want in the Meioutei, but you should go properly greet the landlord at least once.”

“...Landlord?”

“Yes. Some guy from Kitaarisa named Shoizumi. To tell you the truth, I’ve never met this guy, but he’s supposed to be some sort of famous land-owner around the area.”

“Eeh?”

That was a little unexpected. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out just why my brother would go out of his way to contact me from out-of-the-country to do something as normal and conventional as greeting the landlord. But then again, what my brother says always carried weight.

“Understood. Anything else?”

“Nope, nothing else.”

“Eh? Just that? What about the trunk and the Asura Machina?”

“What the hell is that? Asura Machina... is that Spanish for... ass machine³³? Anyway, I told you what I was supposed to from Nao-kun. I get to go on a date with my hubby after this. We’re going to enjoy a full course French cuisine. Feeling jealous? Ahahaha!”

Mom then hung up, leaving only her high-pitched laughter ringing in my ears. I just stood there, frozen for a few moments with the phone tightly in my grip. Going to enjoy a full course French cuisine while your son dines on stir-fried bean sprouts...? And to rub it in his face too? Shit... well, whatever.

In the meantime, Misao as pointing at the burnt lump in the frying pan and interrupted my thoughts by saying, “Tomo, it’s blackening. The bean sprouts!”

32 TL note: Tomo’s mom uses the kanji ‘doutei’, which means ‘virgin’. But the kanji also has the furigana ‘cherry’. And, of course, getting one’s cherry “popped” is a rather visually accurate description of being deflowered.

33 TL note: JK on the ‘ass machine’

“Oh, no!”

There was another trick to stir-frying of course: finish it quickly. Looking down at the charred black corpse that was my bean sprouts, I sighed deeply, lamenting over my dinner. It was all because Mom just kept babbling on and on about pointless things... In the end, just what the hell was with that call? It's not like my brother ever expressed any brotherly concern or whatever.

Kitaarisa's Shioizumi-san, huh?

Hmph!

After I finished eating the burnt, charcoal-tasting pile-of-ash-crap that was my dinner's side dish, the glass repairman finally showed up. I had asked him to come over to repair the shattered window. The man was a regular at the Oohara's bar and so I already knew him well. As he inspected the window broken by the fake miko in the living room, he breathed a sigh of concern for me.

“Man, you really did a number on this, huh? You'll have to replace the entire sash window, you know. And it'll definitely cost you an arm and a leg.”

“...Seriously?” I lamented.

I had thought I would be able to at least afford one pane of window glass, despite being a poor high school student living on his own.

“Take a good look at this. Your window frame has completely melted. It's not the sort of thing that the tiny bit of heat emitted by a lighter could possibly do. Just what did you do, anyway? Were you waving around a gas burner or something?”³⁴

“No...I had an accident here...” I answered with an innocent excuse.

The more I stared closely at the destroyed window, the more it became obvious that this wasn't just your everyday incident, even to someone as naive as me. The leftover fragments of glass seemed to have completely melted. It would not have been easy to melt the glass even if one was using a welder's acetylene torch. The more I thought about this, the more I realized just what sort of monster the fake miko from before dawn must've been.

“Hmm... Did Takatsuki-san really do all of this?” Misao asked, floating upside down in the air with her arms crossed.

I said nothing and only shrugged.

I would have no way of knowing anyway. Even if we assumed for the moment that Takatsuki was the one that did this, just what sort of trick did she pull to melt all the window glass in one blinding instant?

“...In any case, I'll put in an order for more window frames. I think my company should have some in stock; I'll check with them tomorrow. Sorry, but it seems like you'll just have to hang in there like this for tonight.”

“Uhh... Isn't leaving a hole there just tempting fate?” I asked out loud. That's pretty careless of you too, I thought worriedly, but kept my mouth shut.

The window repairman, however, laughed it off heartily, “You'll be fine! The weather report claimed we'll have clear skies today and tomorrow. Besides, and I think I've said this already, but burglars won't go out of their way and break into some rundown house like this one.”

“Well, I guess so...”

Although... even if burglars don't barge in, ghosts and monsters sure as hell do.

But whatever, I thought to myself. Besides, it's not like a pane of glass is any match against that fake miko if she were to break in here again.

“I wonder if she'll come again,” Misao commented while staring at the melted glass shards on the floor with a most unusual expression on her face.

I shook my head absent-mindedly. It was only because that demon was wearing Takatsuki Kanade's face which prevented the feeling of wretched intense fear from gripping me as hard as it

34 TL's Super-deformed (take your pick of which Asura girl) Science corner: While combustion always releases a set amount of energy, you can increase the temperature of the reaction by controlling the intake temperature, oxygen level, water content, and (most importantly) pressure ratio. Why am I writing this here? Well, I spent an entire @#\$ %ing semester being forced to suck down carbon monoxide learning this stuff at college, so I might as well bring it up as often as I can.

should have. In reality, it was a situation a lot more dangerous than my reactions had belied. I had no idea if I would survive another encounter with that pair of death-filled eyes. After all, the opponent was a monster capable of melting the alumina window frame in a split second.

“But if that fake miko was really Takatsuki, then I don’t think she’ll assault me the way she did again. Since you already know who she is, after all,” I said in a crackling voice.

The posting of the class schedules and lists had been just before this morning’s opening ceremony. In other words, last night Takatsuki should have had no way of knowing she and I were in the same class. Which could have been why that fake miko attacked me yesterday without even bothering to disguise her face.

“Uh... then what if it was just someone that looked like her?” Misao quipped back.

“Even then, I don’t think she’ll attack again today.”

“How come?”

“Because you showed up and shocked her.”

Although, I suppose, it was more like the ‘scared-the-living-hell-out-of’ kind of shock. That fake miko got a clear look at Misao and bolted the hell out.

I don’t know why, but a person (which she may or may not be) as scared to all hells by ghosts and spirits would most likely find it difficult to revisit the Meioutei and risk another encounter with Misao.

“Eh... Well... it was because of me then. Be grateful, little boy.”

“...Moreover, why don’t you realize just what sort of terrifying existence you really are?”

“What the hell?! What are you saying?!”

“Hmm, did you say something?” asked a voice.

The window repairman, who had been taking measurements, had returned and apparently overheard our conversation.

“No, not particularly... I didn’t say anything,” I quickly corrected with a fuzzy smile.

With that rumor that I was being possessed by ghosts spreading around, if I wasn’t careful, people might really become scared of me.

Fortunately and happily, the window repairman apparently figured I was just talking to myself and didn’t pursue it any further.

“Alright then, when the materials get here, I’ll give you a call.”

“Ah, please do. I’ll be counting on you,” I replied politely as I went to see the repairman to the front door so he could return to the shop.

“Tomo, about what you said before...” Misao began as she floated lightly behind me, “You shouldn’t count on me too much. I can’t guarantee that I’ll be able to scare her off the next time so don’t you think that you should come up with some sort of method to reliably drive her off?”

“And by ‘some sort of method’ you mean?”

“Um... something like... a molester-repellent spray³⁵, maybe?”

I’ve never heard of any demon that could be driven away by something like that. For that sort of thing, the main ingredient of that would have to be Togarashi X³⁶ or something. Well, considering how garlic is supposed to be effective against vampires...

“She was looking for whatever or whoever that Asura Machina is, so she’ll probably leave us alone if I hand it over to her.”

If this was a ghost story, it was beginning to feel like there was some sort of pattern to this. Stories of monsters seeking their own beheaded skull or some freshly cleaved off arm or whatever was fairly common, but why the hell does this one wander out here and demand something that sounds so ridiculously like a piece of technology?! I mean, just what the hell is this Asura Machina?

“One, it is some treasure hidden away in this mansion. Two, it’s inside the mysterious trunk

35 ED note: Yes, Misao actually says ‘chikan’ (basically ‘molester’). However, based on the next section, it seems that it refers to pepper spray. So ‘molester-repellent spray’ might actually be the Japanese word for pepper spray (although I think that generally a different Japanese word is used), but ‘molester-repellent spray’ sounds so much more fun :D. Whether or not it would work better than Pokemon Repel is a different story.

36 ED note: Togarashi/Tougarashi refers to hot chili peppers, generally cayenne peppers. Togarashi X doesn’t exist, per se, or at least we’ve never heard of it, but it probably refers to an even stronger version of togarashi.

Kurosaki-senpai gave to us. Three, it is something else. Now then, I wonder which one it could be?" Misao mused with a smile.

That's a tough question. Anything that involved my brother, I think, would be suspicious. But even then, I had no idea why she had to come before dawn to attack. Before I moved in, this Meioutei had been vacant for over a year. If she wanted to search the house, then would've been the best time.

That leads to possibility number two. That was also a suspicious possibility. But Kurosaki Shuri brought the mysterious trunk only late last night. And it was difficult to just surmise that the whereabouts of the trunk was intercepted and she came running to attack in under half a day. Moreover, Shuri said that piece of luggage belonged to us. But then again, we had absolutely no clue as to what this Asura Machina was exactly.

"Then, how about directly asking the person in question?"

"Person in question...!?" the face of one particular classmate flashed across my mind as I uttered those words.

Takatsuki Kanade.

Since we were classmates, I knew her phone number and address³⁷. Plus, tomorrow was Saturday and there would be no school.

Certainly a conversation as intrusive as this would be best done outside the classroom away from the prying eyes of others. However...!

"...What should I do if Takatsuki Kanade has nothing to do with this?"

I could almost see Takatsuki's reaction and a chill ran down my back at the thought.

If one small touch in the school corridors today was enough to get me placed in the 'suspicious and weirdo' category, flat out barging into Takatsuki's house would seriously get me labeled a stalker. And if Saeki found out about this, I could almost see her blowing up in rage in my face all over again. Plus, this was only right after the opening ceremony... I needed to avoid being treated like some sort of strange pervert no matter what. As if that wasn't enough, I had to discuss various things with her, such as monsters, demons, and whatever the hell else.

Misao, with a finger on her lips, mused, "Hm... Yeah, it might go down like that if you went to meet her alone."

"Ah..."

Without even having Misao pointing it out, I suddenly realized that the volume of my voice had been steadily rising. The window repairman who was walking in front of me suddenly came to a stop and turned toward me with a slightly disturbed expression. It wasn't that I let down my guard; my voice simply rose bit by bit as I chatted breezily with Misao without me realizing it before it was too late. The repairman's expression was one of someone who had just seen something he didn't want to see.

"Ah... Just here is fine, you don't have to see me out any further. I'll give you a call when the parts come," he said without considering my feelings as the repairman put on his shoes and stepped down and out the door.³⁸

I bid him farewell and, with a screeching squeak, the ancient heavy door of the Meioutei closed.

And once again, another strange rumor about me might just end up spreading.

I sighed lightly as that thought ran through my mind.

Well, I'm used to it already...

The following day, a Saturday, was bright and clear.

Beckoned by the swirling flower pedals dancing in the wind and flowing through the broken

37 ED note: Wait... what? What kind of school gives out the phone number and address of one of the hottest girls in class to everyone in her class? That's just asking for stalking...

38 TL note: In Asian culture, it is polite that you go with your guests at least out the door when they are leaving. Legend has it that this practice originated from a common distrust that your guest would steal your stuff if you just let him walk out of your house by himself. Interestingly enough, Western cultures also do this, however, there isn't a specific term for this (to my knowledge), and it doesn't play as big a role in the facilitation of society as it does in Asia.

window, I woke up from a blank, dull, and sleepy stupor. At first, I had been too scared and unable to sleep due to fear of another attack by the fake miko, but after some time, I managed to fall asleep anyway. And before I knew it, it was past ten in the morning.

Since I wasn't in the mood to make some breakfast at this hour, I changed into my casual clothes and left the house. I headed for the store, which was close to the Meioutei. From start to finish, it took only about ten minutes to walk to the shopping district, which was the normal kind that can be found in any town. At the dead center of the district, standing out against the gray-paved streets, was the Oohara liquor store.

"Oh, Tomo?" An³⁹, who had been inspecting a coupon at the counter, noticed me and looked at me with her big eyes. The sports brand one-piece shirt and the house apron looked well on her.

"What's up? You're not supposed to work today, right? Would you like some coffee? It's made from a sample mix I received." But before she even finished speaking and allowing me a chance to reply, An chucked a can of it at me.

Somehow I managed to catch the thing in my arms before it could clatter to the floor. Curious, I inspected the can and soon frowned. There was something on the can which described a "soy bean taste" that just didn't make it a very appetizing sale to me.

"Oh yeah, where did you guys disappear to after school yesterday? You weren't around when we were supposed to head back home." An asked, casting me a fleeting glance.

Pulling open the can's tab, I nodded back in her direction, "Higuchi and I were visiting the Science Club rooms."

"...Science Club? You and Higuchi?" An's expression was filled with dubious doubt.

I quickly tagged on an explanation, "The club's president, our senior Kurosaki, came to my house and randomly dropped off a trunk a day ago. I figured I should go and try to find out just what was going on with the trunk."

"Uh-huh..." An's expression was becoming increasingly more dubious, "by Kurosaki, do you mean Kurosaki Shuri?"

"Why yes, do you know her?"

"Well, she is pretty infamous. I see, so that person is Kurosaki Shuri, huh? Ah... wait, so that means Nao-nii⁴⁰ also knows Kurosaki Shuri? Oh, now everything makes sense. Uh-huh."

While An was busy comprehending everything by herself, I was completely at a loss. When I looked up, Misao also looked troubled as she shrugged her shoulders.

"What do you mean by infamous? What is she?"

"Huh? Didn't you go met her in person, Tomo?"

"Yeah, I did. I guess you could call it a meeting, at least."

"Huh?"

I gave an explanatory summary about the conversation with Ichihara and Shuri yesterday in the chemistry preparation room.

I told her about the fact that Naotaka was said to have been the one that revived Raku-High's Science Club, and the activities of the Science Club, and about being coerced into joining the Science Club through the withholding of information regarding Naotaka's past and the trunk. I told her everything except about the possibility that Shuri might have been able to see Misao. Throwing that piece of information in would have only served to make me sound incoherent.

"Heh... Black Chemistry, huh...? Now I see." An nodded at me quite a few times with a look of concern. "I had no idea! All I've heard, you see, were just rumors. The upperclassmen were saying there was an amazing demon exorcist master in Raku-High. This person apparently even shows up and helps out the police and has, many times in fact, resolved incredibly complicated cases."

"And that's Kurosaki Shuri?"

"Yep."

39 ED note: It seems that, officially, her name should be "An" instead of "Ann" as previously used in chapter 2. Although using "An" looks odder, it's what we'll be using from now on.

40 ED note: I've decided to keep the honorifics as much as possible. And yes, she does use 'nii' which is a form of 'niisan' which would be roughly equivalent to 'bro' or 'big bro' in English.

“Demon exorcising... can you really actually have that sort of career?”

And in any case, helping out the police solve complicated cases was the job of detectives. I would have figured demon exorcist masters would really have nothing to do with that sort of stuff. And whatever the circumstances, there was no way that the Church, the police, etc. could possibly need help so badly as to be begging for the assistance of one mere high school girl, could they?

“Well, it might have just been a rumor, but, you know, I really could see where it comes from. So that’s how it is, huh? That person was the real Kurosaki Shuri. Yep. Tomo, did you really join up with the Science Club then?”

“Nope, I’m still on reserve.”

“What’s that mean?” An asked out loud. Reading between the lines, I knew that she had snuck in a ‘You’re not being very direct’ snide criticism into her words.

“I couldn’t help it. If I don’t join the club, she won’t answer all my questions.”

“And by questions, you mean about things like what’s in the trunk?”

I nodded in response and An mulled over my plight. In the meantime, I kept quiet and enjoyed the taste of my protein flavored coffee.

“Delicious?” Misao asked, to which I shook my head.

Hell no. It was bad. In fact, it was tasted absolutely dreadful.

“This just hit me, but couldn’t this be exactly what Nao-nii planned?”

“Planned?”

“Yes, yes. You see, right now the Science Club has Kurosaki-senpai as the only member, right? So wouldn’t they be disbanded because they couldn’t meet the member count requirement as laid out by the Student Council?

Yeah, I guess so, I thought to myself as I nodded in agreement. If this went on and she couldn’t get even one new member to join up, then I doubt they’d even let her continue the club.

“And consequently, wouldn’t she be doing what she can to force you to join? She and Nao-nii colluding and conspiring together...”

“Eh... if that’s the case, then the contents of the trunk would be...”

“Yep. Nothing important in reality. But if you take it to be something your brother is entrusting to you, you’d still be interested in it, right? Then, using that secret as bait, they plan to force the club onto you. I’m sure Kurosaki-senpai and Nao-nii have discussed this through. Like, when they thought of decent methods to secure new members for the club.”

“Oh, I see” I actually gave the matter serious thought.

Now that she mentioned it, it really was an amazingly-likely possibility.

If Naotaka was the one pulling the strings behind her, then that would explain a great many suspicions and doubts, like how the hell she was able to time her appearance before me so well two nights before, or how she knew about the existence of Misao. And if nothing else, Naotaka loved micromanaging petty little things like that.

“An-chan, amazing...” Misao nodded in approval.

However, An took no time to puff up her chest in pride over her own theory and instead pressed on with her reasoning, “Yeah, if you think about it, it would also explain why you can’t get that trunk to open up.”

“...That certainly would make sense.”

It was not being unable to open the trunk that was the problem; rather, it was the circumstances that would allow it to be opened that was the issue. It was old, but surely it was made to be heavy and tough for a reason.

“Hmm... maybe she was also only pretending to be able to see me. If she’s really involved with Naotaka, she just might do things like that,” Misao mused aloud as she bobbed about in the air, but provided no further useful proposals and theories on the matter.

Then, An suddenly looked up at me with a serious face, “Oh right, Tomo, didn’t you say you had some business to do here?”

Oh right. I had completely forgotten.

“I came here to take a look at your maps. I need to go pay a visit to the home of some guy named

Shioizumi from the Kitaarisa district but I have no idea what his exact address is.”

The Oohara store kept a large residency map for use during deliveries. The thing was detailed to the point of even having the family names written above their respective locations.

“By Shioizumi-san, you mean the landlord Shioizumi-san? Wait, so the Meioutei is also possibly the property of the Shioizumi household?” An managed to grasp all that on her own, saving me the need for an explanation. But the fact that even An knew the name meant that this Shioizumi person really was some seriously famous land owner.

“Found it. Here.” An pointed at the location on a page of the map spread out on the counter.

Wow, I breathed.

I knew the part of the city known as Kitaarisa was a wealthy high-class neighborhood, but to think that massive mansion sitting in the dead center of it would be Shioizumi’s house... I got it now. That would be why this guy was so famous. From the looks of it, the place easily occupied the same area as Raku-High.

“...Tomo,” Misao urged me on while pressing tightly against my back.

An ominous feeling was creeping down my spine and making my hair stand on end.

In truth, aside from checking out the map, I had another reason for coming over to the Oohara store: Takatsuki Kanade. If I went and intruded upon Takatsuki’s house by myself, they would no doubt get up-and-arms about it. So I had come here to ask An if she would be willing to go with me and visit Takatsuki out of classmate friendliness.

When the idea first hit me, I had thought it was brilliant, but in reality, it was surprisingly hard to put forward my request into words to An. I could think of no good persuasive reason that I could use to convince An to come with me to visit Takatsuki while keeping quiet about the business with Misao. And it would have probably also invited in all sorts of misunderstandings.

“Know your way? If you’re going to write it down, did you bring a pen?” An’s face suddenly appeared right in front of me.

She couldn’t see Misao, but the fact I was firmly and tightly sandwiched between two girls made the situation unusually comfortable for me.

“Um...” Without any actual thoughts, all I could do was pause there with my mouth firmly open but no words forthcoming.

“– Welcome!” An called out at about the same time.

Turning around, I saw the automatic doors of the shop swing open and a male customer sporting a pure-white coat step inside. What a weird customer, I thought to myself. Buying alcohol this early in the morning was certainly unusual. Even when it did happen on occasion, it was usually a housewife who ran out of cooking wine or a group of people right before they headed out for Hanami⁴¹.

But the atmosphere around this particular white coated man seemed to fit neither type.

His eyes and expression were hidden under the brim of a low hat. The rim of the man’s coat was lined in a sparkling golden color. Finally, a faded cross hung tightly around his neck and could be clearly seen right above his chest.

“...A catholic priest? He sure looks young! And kind of unreliable...” Misao whispered with a hint of surprise.

She had a point. This guy looked extremely young for a priest. His face and features were still innocent and childish and he could have maybe passed off as a high school student. But in any case, Misao, since you’re still a ghost after all, shouldn’t you be at least a little more respectful of these holy figures?

“Are you looking for red wine? If so, they’re over here,” An said with a cheery, welcoming smile as she directed the customer towards the proper storage box.

And since I had nothing else to do, I simply sipped nasty-tasting coffee in a corner of the shop until the priest selected and left with his newly-purchased imported wine.

Right before the priest left, he apparently realized I was in the corner and threw me a glance of

41 TL note: Hanami is that thing they do in Japan during spring when groups of Japanese people get together, purchase foodstuffs (and alcohol) and sit under the Sakura tree fields and have fun, kind of like a special kind of picnic.

greeting, to which Misao waved in response. For an instant, it looked like the priest seemed to freeze in his tracks... but then again, that might have just been my imagination. From between the gaps of his white coat, colors that resembled the ones on the Raku-High uniform flashed through.

"... Lately around here, I occasionally see him around. That priest customer just now," An said as she filed the payment into the register.

But still, I responded with an "Eh..." The man was contributing to the sales of the part-time job I depended on; I had no reason to be displeased. Actually, I was rather grateful he didn't also feel the need to start strangling me like the fake miko from yesterday.

"Well then, what's up? You were saying something earlier?" An asked while sporting the look of having helpful intentions and the appearance of actually giving me her full attention.

"Uh, I want to ask a small favor of you... how long is your shift today?"

"I promised Dad I'd work until he comes back from his deliveries. What favor?"

"Aah, um... it's a complicated, but yesterday..."

"Oh my, Tomo-kun?" a gentle lady's voice interrupted my own stammering one.

Coincidentally, An's mother appeared from within the inner sanctums of the shop wearing a flowery patterned one piece dress that tightly hugged her form. I bet people often seriously confused her and An for sisters when they stroll through the city together; she had the small frame of the lolita-type of woman. Looking at my face, she seemed to suddenly recall something apparently interesting as she covered her lips and chuckled.

Just what is she going to say? I thought.

"Tomo-kun, I hear you found a girl you like?"

"Huh?"

What the heck? I looked to An in surprise.

Just where did Oohara's Mom⁴² hear that baseless rumor from? An, meanwhile, shakily turned toward her mom with her eyebrows arched up. In a high-pitched voice, she cried, "Mom! Stop saying weird things!"

"What? Don't whine, An. I only heard that there's an amazingly cute girl in the same class and Tomo-kun is apparently quite interested in her."

"I'm not whining!"

"Oh really now? I wonder... Hmmmm?" As if on purpose, Oohara's Mom cupped her face in her hands as she teased and prodded purposefully. While staring at the unusually panicky An, she had managed to read most of the details of the situation.

By 'cute girl in the same class', she probably meant Takatsuki. If that was the case, then it certainly wouldn't be a lie to say I was interested in Takatsuki. But coming back to what Oohara's Mom just said, it seemed that An was going to be under the false impression that I fell for Takatsuki at first sight.

"This somehow got really complicated, huh?" Misao whispered, twisting her lips.

I stood silently and stared at the ceiling.

If I asked An right now to come with me to go see Takatsuki, I could already see the disastrous complications looming in front of me.

Plus, An probably wouldn't believe me right now if I told her that maybe Takatsuki could see ghosts. If An was at least a major spirit- and ghost-fanatic like Higuchi, an explanation would have been easy. However...

"Um... yeah..." An broke the uncomfortable silence with those hesitating words before the tension in the air could explode and kill us all.

"Tomo, if you're going to go all the way to Kitaarisa, you should go by bike. I'll let you borrow mine," An said quickly as she spun on her heels and dashed into the back of the shop, probably to retrieve the key.

42 ED note: To be accurate, Tomo actually refers to her as something similar to 'Mother of the Oohara family' which is a common way of reference one uses for a friend/classmate's mother (but not directly). However, 'Oohara Family's Mom' sounds too odd, and 'Mrs. Oohara' (which is what is commonly used in the English) isn't quite right either (since it can be mistaken for 'Oohara-san'). So to try not to be totally inaccurate and to not sound too weird in English, 'Oohara's Mom' is used. This is one of those many things that are a pain to translate/edit.

“Yeah. That would be wise. If you’re available, come by the house at night again and let’s all have dinner together,” Oohara’s Mom said with a sweet smile.

When it came to mothers, the first image that always came to mind wasn’t my own dumb mom but this mother, with her smile. Oohara’s Mom, after glancing in the direction An disappeared to, turned towards me and looked at me with a very meaningful smile.

“Don’t tell An but I’m rooting for you.”

“Huh... rooting for me?” For what?

“Takatsuki-san, was it? That’s quite a good choice, ne!”

“Oh no! It’s a misunderstanding!”

Even if you say that with a smile, it was still seriously distracting.

However, Oohara’s Mom only narrowed her eyes in fun and enjoyment, “But it’s a good thing, isn’t it? I was actually a little worried, you know. I mean, you already have a cute childhood friend ghost haunting you, don’t you? And I thought that since you loved her, you had no interest in real-life girls. I guess you’re a normal healthy boy after all, huh!”

Aah... I was struck speechless. Just what the hell was this person saying all of sudden?

And floating to the upper left of Oohara’s Mom, Misao’s mouth was wide open in a gasp of surprise. Moreover, why was she laughing with her eyes like a cat that had its chin tickled would? Just what sort of meaning could that have?

“Here’s the key... and what were you two talking about?” An asked suspiciously when she returned and noticed the almost indescribable expression that must have been clearly on my face.

I remained speechless.

Oohara’s Mom laughed.

“Okay then, I’ll be borrowing the bike.” I took the key from An and bolted out the shop like I was in the midst of a prison break.

The work-related local delivery bike was parked out in the shop parking spot. While I was squatting in front of the bike unlocking the lock, An came chasing.

“Um, Tomo!”

Her face was unusually flushed and she was unusually gasping for air, “Don’t pay too much attention to what my mom said earlier, okay?”

“What Auntie⁴³ said?”

My heart had skipped a few beats back there. About Misao... I had never even once talked about Misao until just now, and so I was certain that person could not have heard about the rumors about me being haunted by ghosts. Yet just how was she able to drag the conversation towards me falling in love with a ghost? I wanted to keep Misao from getting too carried away on this.

However, An said, “Um well, I really didn’t whine or make a fuss or anything like that, okay?”

Oh, we were still on that? Before I even had time to think about those words, An waved goodbye and ran back to the shop. I had no idea just what sort of impression that was suppose to leave on me and so all I could do was watch her back as she disappeared back into the shop. I had no idea just why An would go out of her way just to say something like that. Unwillingly, I had already gotten accustomed to bad rumors spreading out of things I didn’t really understand and I had become quite resistant to those sorts of attacks. Besides, Takatsuki was a beauty and I did make some suspicious advances on her yesterday so it’s not unreasonable to assume An’s Mom could have found out about it by going to the school.

“What’s with her?” I whispered as I glanced up at Misao.

Misao, however, was staring off far into the distance and did not respond.

As I started pedaling the squeaky work-use bike, Misao conveniently sat down on the passenger seat. Wearing the same crescent-eyed smile that she made earlier on her face, she threw her ghostly translucent arms around my waist. Of course, her arms left neither sensation nor impression on my body as they merely passed through me. However, Misao still laughed in satisfaction. She was in an unusually good mood.

43 ED note: As hinted at in (11), this is how one normally refers to a friend/classmate’s mother: ‘oba-san’ or ‘Auntie’ which is the appropriate (for once) the English equivalent.

I remained quiet and continued pedaling the bike. Under just the weight of one person, the work-use bike quickly picked up speed on the paved stone streets.

I had a general idea of how big the place would be from looking at the map, but the Shioizumi mansion was far more enormous than I could have ever imagined.

Along the road, a near-endless length of white mud wall stood erect, preventing all outsiders from even gasping at the buildings inside in awe. If one managed to make it past the front gate, a magnificent stone-paved path stretched out from there, like the ones seen in Kung-Fu movies that lead to a grand Buddhist temple. This path however, seemed to stretch all the way up the small mountain.

Yes, there seriously was a mountain in the mansion garden. To put it lightly, it was a rare sight to behold.

“Yeah... as expected of the landlord of a haunted monster mansion; he really has the ostentation to back it up,” Misao stated her thoughts bluntly.

Hell yeah.

I was beginning to regret deciding to just barge in through the front door instead of through some back door. But then again, just where would a back door be? If it was like what the words suggested and it was actually directly opposite the front door, then I’d have to end up climbing over a mountain to get there.

After being lost for a little while, I found myself before the front gate. I buzzed the intercom. Soon, a woman’s voice spoke out through some speaker.

“... Natsume Tomoharu-sama, is it? We have been expecting you. Please come inside.”⁴⁴

I had given no forewarning I was coming, yet I was expected and being welcomed in. What was going on? I looked up towards Misao in confusion and she shook her head since, of course, she had no idea either.

“Maybe Naotaka-kun made some previous arrangements?”

“Maybe, huh?”

There was no other possibility. Pushing away the mild ominous feeling churning around my insides, I parked the bicycle at the edge of the entrance gate and stepped into the Shioizumi mansion grounds. The garden before me was far more like a forest than a family garden and while trekking through it I thought the place bore a charming old Japanese mansion aura.⁴⁵

At the house entrance, a lady stood outside waiting to greet me. She was a tall lady dressed in a pair of jeans and a light cardigan. Probably the daughter of the household? That was certainly a little unexpected. One would think that with a house this big, it would be reasonable have ten or twenty servants milling about.

“You’re Naotaka’s younger brother? I see,” she said with a laugh as she looked at me.

Just what did she see?

“... You know my brother?”

“Yes, he’s famous isn’t he? Over here, follow me.” After leaving me with that hopelessly vague answer, she began to walk away.

In front of us, the path led up the garden hill. Further up the path, after we passed the giant stone Torii⁴⁶, we arrived at a set of stone stairs, which she began to ascend. The climb was so incredibly long that I had wondered if it would ever end.⁴⁷

44 TL note: Keigo warning! We don’t have such hardcore honorifics in English so the above sentence is a weakened shadow of what it was in Japanese.

45 TL note: If you’re acquainted with Japanese culture, then you probably already have an impression of what these traditional Japanese houses are like. In any case, they’re generally one story wooden structures with lots of sliding paper-thin doors, tatami mats, those gardens with bamboo trees and that small bamboo cut thing that fills with water then empties it periodically, and probably a kotatsu stashed somewhere for winter use. If you live in a home like this then you are probably a linear combination of the following: the daughter of a wealthy yakuza boss, affiliated with the emperor of Japan, incredibly wealthy, living in the country side, and or an anime character.

46 TL note: Recall that Torii are those large red/orange arch/gate-things at the entrances to Shinto shrines.

47 TL note: The above paragraph, as it was in Japanese, had little continuity and so made little sense. Consequently, the above is what I assume the occasionally logically-challenged author is trying to say.

“Is this place a Shinto shrine?” I asked between wheezing breaths.

“In the past it was, apparently.” The lady in jeans, apparently completely free from the influence of gravity, climbed the stone stairs naturally and breezily. Was she just used to the climb or was she some hardcore athlete that had gone through some extreme limit-pushing training? Just which was it?

“This place also probably housed a Shinto shrine in the past. I wonder if the Noh Theater⁴⁸ is still around... I’m sorry.”

“Eh? For what?”

“Making you come all the way here. Nowadays, my grandfather meets with almost no one. He doesn’t even eat unless I bring food to him. So when he straight up stated he would meet with you, the whole family was surprised,” she said with a chuckle. There was something about her overly-friendly way of talking that made her seem to glow with an aura of unusual attractiveness. She looked like an adult, but in truth she was probably just around my brother’s age. Personally, I thought it would be great if she got married to my brother and became an older sister to me.

But in any case, I was just here for a polite post-move-in greeting. I didn’t know if it was such a good idea to go meet this magnanimous and legendary grandfather face-to-face.

“This way, come on in.”

Our destination, in the end, was a small building nestled in the middle of the mountain. One could have mistaken this place for a Lego-block log house. I would never have figured that this was the residence of some major landlord.

Although unexpected, at least the outside appearance was acceptable. Upon stepping into the house, however, I came face-to-face with reality. It was truly incredible that I didn’t let out a scream.

“What the hell... is this...?” Misao whispered in terror.

There were countless whirlpools everywhere.

The walls, the ceiling, the carpet, the decorations atop the drawers, even the wind chimes underneath the window sill – everything was engraved with whirlpool patterns. The curtains were, of course, patterned with whirlpools. The legs of the metal bed post were patterned with a rococo-styled whirlpool. And finally, what was on the screen saver of the old computer on top of the desk? A whirlpool. This room definitely could not belong to a sane man. Just looking at it all made my eyes quiver and flicker.

Sitting on top of the sewn-in whirlpool patterned sheets on the bed was an old man in a whirlpool-patterned yukata listening to classical musical. The music originated from a nearly old phonograph. Of course, it had been engraved with a whirlpool insignia. This guy must have been incredibly thorough to have gone that far with his whirlpool patterns.

“Grandfather, I have brought Natsume Tomoharu-sama,” the Shioizumi granddaughter said as she motioned me to enter the room. Apparently she was just going to push me into the room with this whirlpool-loving old guy by myself.

Old-man Shioizumi turned and motioned in my direction with the awkwardness of a broken tea doll. He was an old man wrinkly enough to be confused for various preserved foods, but there was a certain sparkle in his eyes that left an impression on me.

“... It’s beautiful, don’t you think?” the man began after looking back at the whirlpools in the room. I was a little taken back by his surprisingly steady tone.

The old man lit the end of a long spiral tobacco pipe and puffed out smoke from the end. The classical piece flowing in the room was Raphael’s Bolero. Riding the simple resonating beats of the melody, the tobacco smoke steadily expanded in the room.

“The spiral is the core of this world’s existence. Or you could call it something that resembles this world. The weather, life, the motion of heavenly bodies, and the laws of everything are kept within the spiral. Amongst theoretical physics, there are those who believe the universe itself is nothing

ED note: This is why I really, really don’t like this author. He has issues describing things, especially when it comes to doing it in a manner that even remotely flows.

48 TL note: Recall that Noh drama is that truly traditional Japanese theater (so traditional they don’t make anime out of it) where actors are forced to wear like 18 layers of clothes, heavy lead-based make-up, and don rather frightening masks.

more than an expanding spiral spinning out in at the speed of light – what do you think of that?”

“Heh?”

What do I think...? How the hell would I know even if you asked me? Maybe my brother could give you a satisfactory answer if you asked him.

However, the old man did not wait for my reply.

“Welcome, Natsume Tomoharu-kun. I’m pleased to meet you.”

“Hah...” I stared at the old man, getting lost in the conversation. I was becoming ridiculously restless and uncomfortable.

I had always figured that lots of rich people might be a little weird, but this one took the cake and ran with it. The fact that the house rented out by this guy would turn out to be haunted was, in retrospect, as obvious as day. In fact, I was starting to think it would be weirder if he didn’t do something strange or weird to the place.

“Engage me in a boring conversation for a little while. A joke from an old and short gramps,” he said with old and pale parted lips.

I could not refuse him.

I said nothing and my silence was apparently taken for consent⁴⁹. The old man took a deep puff of tobacco and continued talking.

“The spiral... I believe nature is composed of spirals as opposed to straight lines because the spiral is more efficient. This might just be a post-hoc theory, though. However, if empty space was a direct derivation from the spiral, then it is obvious the theory is a direct consequence. So if empty space is a spiral-type existence, then time also should be the same type of spiral-type existence.”

What the hell were you saying all of a sudden?

Misao and I stared at the whirlpool-patterned yukata man with blank, uncomprehending, expressions⁵⁰.

Whatever the case, the guy managed to line up some quite difficult diction decisions, but whether that served his purpose... well, he probably didn’t want to just explain to us how great spirals were. Maybe this gramps was a believer from some obscure spiral church. It seemed almost as if this guy really believes that if he uses yukatas and bed sheets and such with whirlpool patterns on it, he’ll win the lottery, cure cancer, and weaken the influence of gravity. And in the end, the rest of the family got tired of putting up with his antics and ended up quarantining him in this small Lego-box of a house. If that was the case, then this was one sad and pitiful old man.

That would also explain why we were forced to keep him company.

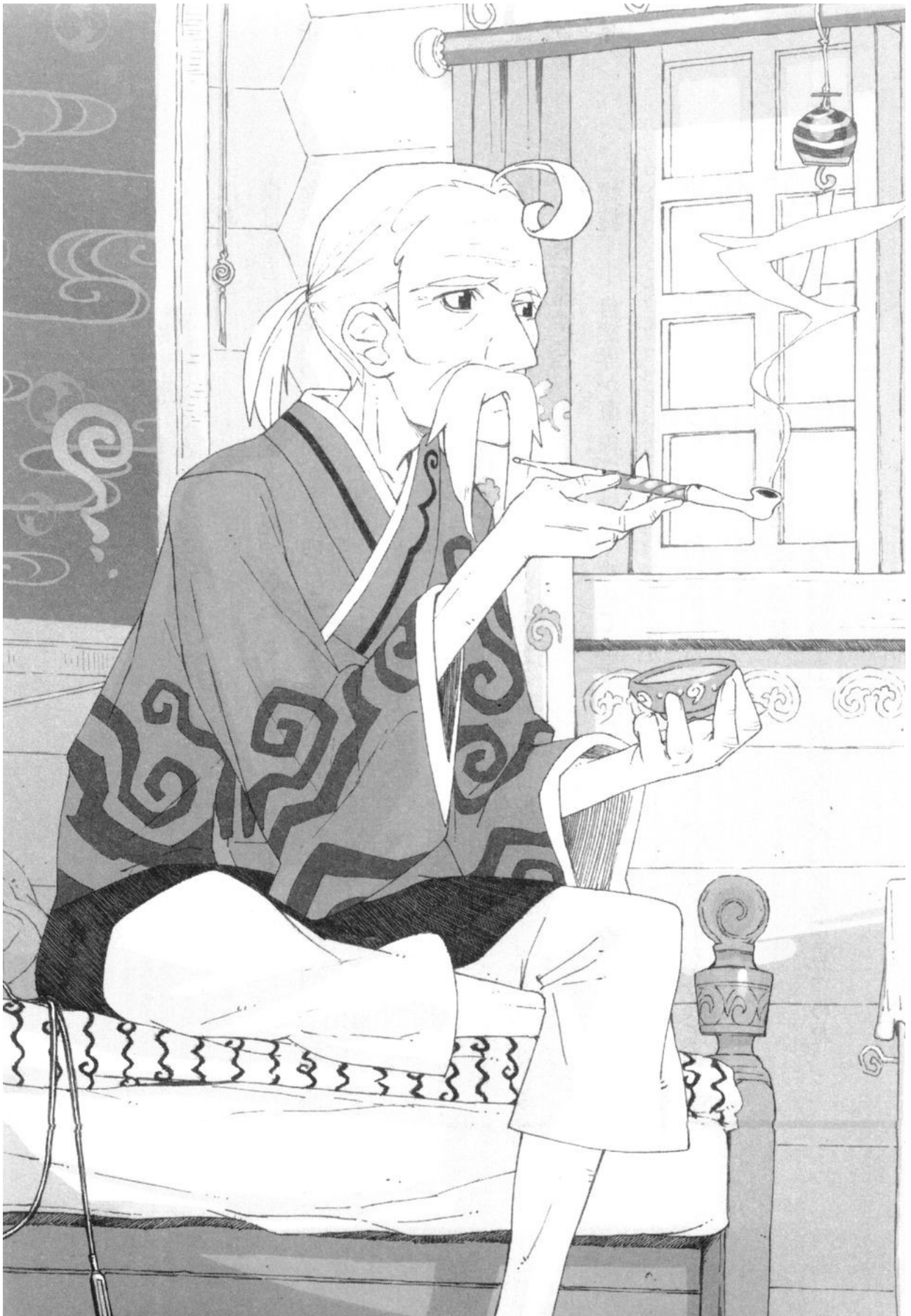
However, the old man continued talking...

“If we assume that time flows linearly from past to future then that must mean that it is almost impossible to change the past or the future. This is because, if we were to repair and alter the sequential time line, we would substantiate inescapable paradoxes of causality. However...!” The man’s thin arm flew up in the air as he continued, “If we assume that time flows in a spiral pattern, as opposed to the standard linear time we’re cognizant of, then it becomes possible.⁵¹”

49 TL note: silence does not always mean consent... unless you’re talking about rape. JK... >_> well, even if you do take it seriously, there’s like 7 people who read this so it’s not like I’m ruining lives on a grand scale here

50 TL rant: I don’t blame them. The old man’s logic does not make sense. Firstly, what the hell is “spirals are more efficient than lines”? Efficiency, for the most part, is measured in energy in over energy out and I have no clue how you’re going to define that for a line and a spiral. Secondly, nature prefers spirals because our physical rate laws are differential equations satisfied by the exponential and sinusoidal functions of the form $y = f(t)$, where f is a combination of exponential and sinusoidal functions. So while if you plot y_1 against t , you will see exponential or periodic behavior, plotting y_1 against y_2 generates, you guessed it, spirals. And who the hell said space was a spiral? Nothing in all of physics suggests that if I pick one nonzero constant velocity I will end up with anything other than a monotonically increasing displacement. And it also doesn’t follow that if space is a spiral, time should also be a spiral, space and time don’t relate to each other that way. Goddamn sci-fi authors that never went to college or did any background research on their subject. /rant tl;dr

51 TL note: @#%ing, this doesn’t avoid the paradox at all. If you’re to parameterize a spiral (or any shape) you have to define some sort of parameter which is monotonic and continuous which, for matters of convenience, we always use time. But if you switch time with some other coordinate, you still have the issue of monotonic continuity somewhere else that still doesn’t allow for a return to an old value. @#%ing Sci-fi-for-kids authors, such a pet peeve for me.



Suddenly, the singing record player sitting on the counter skipped a beat.

A hellish screech blasted from the record player and the record needle jumped off. But that was that. The old man, as if nothing had happened, returned to his bed. The only thing that changed was the background music. The bravura of the strings' closing in the bolero was, once again, replaced with the dull monotone of the woodwinds of the opening. It was the fault of the skipping needle.

Could this also be called time spinning backwards on itself? Actually, cassette tapes and digital videos could pull off that sort of nonsense quite easily...

"And with that, the symphony begins its performance a second time. However, can this performance really be called the past? The spiral is a fusion of the repeating past and the flowing future. Almost as if the two form a sort of inseparable Möbius ring, and therein we resolve the former plaguing paradox. Namely, we only exist here today because we have already been influenced by the future. Thus it isn't as if we're simply trapped in the blind alley of time, but we are actually given second chances at our choices." After spewing out all that in one breath, the old man slowly puffed out tobacco smoke. It looked like a particularly unhealthy way to smoke.

"... That's all I have to say," the old man said as he twirled his long mustache with his fingertips.

Now just leave me alone, I seriously thought to myself. I was feeling a little restless from not understanding a word of what he was saying to the very end. However, the old man did not apparently seem to mind or care about my impressions.

"I give you permission to continue living in the Meioutei, Natsume Tomoharu. I don't mind you using it to your best judgment," he said with a completely more compassionate and understanding tone.

I didn't really understand what was happening and so I merely nodded my head in thanks. I wondered what will happen to me next, but the objective of my visit had already been achieved. That was great. I wondered what I'd think if he suddenly turned and told me to buy a whirlpool-pattern blanket for 10,000 yen. But however!

"You're probably presently being forced to make a choice now," the forceful foreshadowing punched out of the old man's mouth as I finished with the formalities and had turned to leave.

I spun around and faced him; his face cracked a faint smile.

"I pray you make the correct choice for yourself."

A horrible, unnerving tingle ran down my spine as I left behind the room with the countless whirlpools. For a short while, my eyes felt like they were swirling around.

When I returned from the mysterious spiral space to normal common space, there was no longer anyone outside. The granddaughter, who had already finished her role of leading me in, had apparently long since left.

I had a mountain of questions I wanted to ask her, but I figured it would probably be better if I didn't involve myself too deeply with the people of this family. Besides, I had already accomplished my mission of greeting my landlord and was, for some reason, filled with a burning desire to go home.

"That was pretty interesting, huh?" Misao asked rhetorically with a feather-light sigh.

I shrugged. Well, it was good material for a joke and that Higuchi would probably have been pleased.

It didn't hit me when I was being led here, but the old man's house was buried unexpectedly deep in the forest.

And the ascending mountain path I had thought was whole was actually, in fact, split and forked every now and then. After passing through many paths I had yet to cross while trying to descend the mountain, I eventually realized I was lost.

To someone unfamiliar with wood-lore and the innards of a forest, the scenery everywhere looked the same. The dense bamboo grooves, the greenery of every tree and branch, and everything else blocked my path and my vision was proving to be ineffective. That lengthy stone staircase was nowhere to be found either.

"Misao, do you happen to know the way back?"

“Eh... I don’t know. You didn’t know where you were going?” Misao retorted in a I’m-tired-of-you tone.

I stayed quiet and twisted my lips.

No matter how expansive this place could be, it was still just someone’s residence. Thus, if I just properly walk in one direction, I figured I would eventually make it through. The thought that I could meet disaster in someone’s backyard never once occurred to me.

“Can you please investigate the path a bit from the sky?”

“Eeeh?!” Misao exclaimed with her lips wide with disbelief.

Misao absolutely hated all these ghost-related powers which I found to be useful. She would rage because girls didn’t normally use things like this. However, this time I was sure the need was simply too great for her to not help.

“Um... please.”

“I guess there’s no other choice... wait here –” With a short sigh, Misao’s ghostly body billowed up gently toward the sky.

I stared at the floating girl with a blank mind.

“Hey! Quit peeking!” she yelled furiously like it was sexual harassment! Misao, pressing her short skirt against her with both hands, stopped her ascent about a meter right above my head. Because she was a ghost haunting me, she couldn’t be separated too far from me. That was about her limit⁵².

“What can you see?”

“Ugh... It’s no good. The trees are in the way so I can’t really see... ah!”

“What?”

“I see buildings! Huge ones! It’s straight ahead down about fifty meters from here, though.”

“Fifty meters... isn’t that cliff?”

So there was a dead end just ahead. At the edge of the cliff, yellowing forestry formed a simple fence around it⁵³.

“They’re not sheer cliffs or anything. Plus there’s a bamboo groove. Don’t you think you can get down somehow?”

“So it’s just my problem, huh?” I complained all the way until I reached the cliff.

A few sparse shafts of bamboo poked up at me. However, I could also certainly see the roofs of buildings. The buildings were pretty massive. It felt like it would be the main body of the Shinto shrine.

But Misao was right: this wasn’t an absolutely impossible cliff to scale. Actually, it was the kind of declination that would probably show up on the pro slopes at some ski resort. There was plenty of vegetation growing that could serve as footholds too.

“Somehow, this looks doable...”

I’d really end up looking like a bamboo robber, though, I thought as I crossed over the bamboo groove bunches. Stepping onto the soft fertile soil that no one else had apparently stepped on before, I could feel my shoes filling with all sorts of earth. Gross, the thought played across my mind at the same moment my feet slipped. Instinctively, I reached out and felt a branch, which I tried to cling to, but it was apparently rotten and it almost instantly crumpled in my hands.

“Uwah!” I screamed out. At least, I thought I actually screamed out, but it wasn’t even that sheer or fast a drop. I’m not doing this on purpose, am I? I thought to myself as I flamboyantly fell backwards as I slipped down the cliff. On the way down, tree branches punched me the in face and bits of earth threatened to suffocate my breath. But before I knew it, after I had tumbled down who knows how many meters, I finally stopped after crashing into the wall of a building.

“... Still alive, Tomo?” Misao asked as she slowly floated down in the air.

With scratches and cuts all over my face and body, I raised my head. I froze in exactly that position.

52 ED note: Funny how Tomo was able to go downstairs back in chapter 2 with her still in his bedroom. I swear the ceiling had to be over a meter above Tomo’s head.

53 TL note: Seriously, if you see a connection in the above sentence, I’ll send you a basket of fruits and a greeting card.
ED note: I assume that the author is trying to describe how the bamboo grove bunches seemed to act like a fence. But given how crappy the author is at imagery, and how he randomly decides to describe random things, I’m not sure I could even give him that much credit.

Before me, a storehouse stood before me.

Massive double doors as wide as I was tall stood wide open.

Perhaps they were airing the place out? As I took peek inside, my eyes caught site of an item stashed inside the storehouse that shone out from the darkness, reflecting the rays of sunlight.

At first, I thought it was the leftover part of some machine, but I was wrong. Escapements, planetary gears, springs, winches⁵⁴, heavy spindles, and cone pulleys were clearly visible. All of these things and a skillful hand were needed to make this.

“...A doll?” Misao whispered.

A three or four meter tall massive marionette leaned against the wall of the storehouse as if it was simply abandoned there.

It was reinforced by wood and steel, and coated with hides and skins. It was an incredibly old-style design doll.

It had no decorations, but it bore the traces and vestiges of having been made to move about before. But it probably couldn't move anymore. Parts of it were strewn here and there and it didn't look like it had been at all maintained.

Buried within a vast mountain residence that one would not know existed... An old storehouse... The song of the wild birds and the dancing pedals of the cherry trees outside...

The broken doll, shining within the calm and quiet spring sunlight's deep shadow, bore a sort of solemn impressiveness that seemed to transcend time. Misao and I stood staring at the sight with our breaths stolen.

At that moment, the air behind me moved.

Misao was the first one to react. The ghost girl twirled silently around and her movements froze in alarm.

“Who are you...?” a voice asked. It was a beautiful voice but, somehow, it also sounded scared and uncertain.

I slowly turned around like a troubled youngster who had just been caught shoplifting red-handed.

“Ah!” I swallowed my breath.

The person right in front of me also stood, eyes wide and frozen, wearing the same surprised and speechless expression.

Standing right there was a long black haired young lady with very bold eyebrows and fair skin. Her features were well proportioned and balanced. She wore the white-laced red robes of a Shinto miko. She clutched a bamboo broom tightly to her chest.

I shook my head violently. Why the hell was I meeting her here of all places?!

Moreover, there was no way I could have confused her for someone else even under this situation. Not this girl.

She was the Miko-lookalike that nearly killed me yesterday.

And she happened to wear Takatsuki Kanade's face.

“Ah~...” the girl in the miko robes began. She studied me seriously and, sensing my returning stare, looked down at her own clothes. “Aaaah!”

For some reason, her face suddenly flushed bright red all the way to her ears and she quickly covered her chest. The parts of her figure that jutted out against the tight form of the miko attire were being ogled at by me – which was probably pretty embarrassing for her. I had thought she had dressed like that out of personal preference, but that apparently wasn't the case. And as a consequence, she hung her head in shame and mumbled in a troubled and indecipherable tone. This was definitely Takatsuki Kanade's voice.

The bewilderment and confusion then worsened. My grasp on the situation had completely slipped away.

Wasn't this place the home of that landlord from earlier? Or maybe this was some sort of bad

⁵⁴ ED note: The author actually writes 'yukimodori', which refers to the action of coming and going. But given that it is smack in the middle of a list of mechanical parts, I guess is supposed to refer to some moving part that moves forwards and backwards or similar (maybe winch/piston/pump-like?). Anyway, the actual word probably isn't very important, so you can assume it's a winch or something similar. Anyway, given how it doesn't seem like the author knows much about physics and math, I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't know much about mechanical parts.

daydream I was being forced to see caused by contact with that whirlpool old man?

However, there was no mistaking the fact that the person before me was the same monster that had melted the glass in the Meioutei in an instant – and at the same time Takatsuki Kanade.

Misao pushed herself between us as if to protect me. Her frail shoulders were tense with anger and she faced her opponent threateningly in an almost cat-like fashion. But the girl simply hung her head quietly, showing no sign that hinted that she could or could not see Misao.

The atmosphere was unbelievably tense.

Even if I just let her go, as the situation was now, the girl probably still wouldn't talk. So I racked my brains desperately for something to say to break the heavy shroud of silence that had buried us.

There was a mountain of things I needed to explain to her as well as questions I needed to ask her.

The reason I was here. The reason she was here. Was she the same person as that monster that had attempted to kill me? Was she really Takatsuki Kanade or someone else? Finally, I wanted to ask about about Misao. Could she see Misao?

"Ah~... Um..." A flood of too many questions rushed through my mind, leaving me with no idea what would be a good place to start.

The girl abruptly raised her face and my mind instantly went blank. Since I was rendered completely unable to think and unable to process thoughts, I simply let the first thing that came to mind roll out from my mouth.

"Do you... believe in ghosts?"

Somewhere in the distance, the clear-as-crystal voice of a nightingale resounded in the air.

